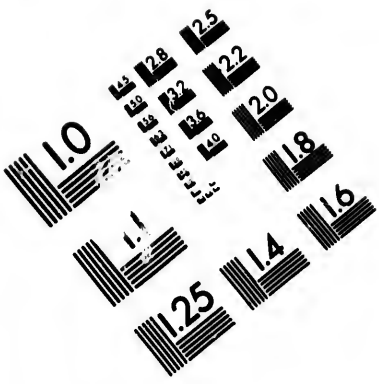

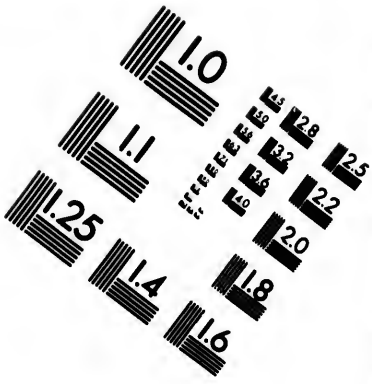

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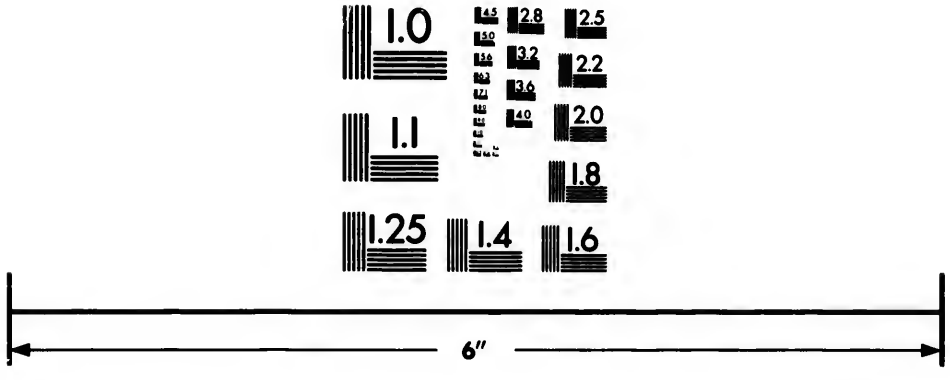

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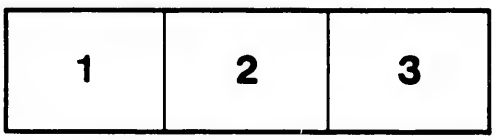

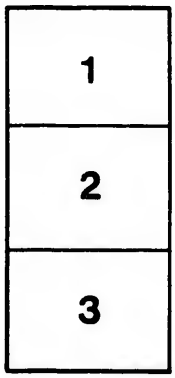

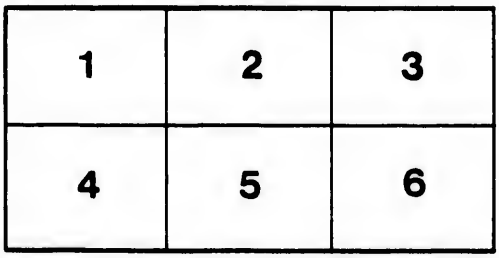

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UNDER SEALED ORDERS

A NOVEL

BY

GRANT ALLEN

AUTHOR OF

'THE TENTS OF SHEM,' 'THE DUCHESS OF POWYSLAND,'

'THE SCALLYWAG,' ETC.

A NEW EDITION

LONDON

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1896

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UNDER SEALED ORDERS

CHAPTER I.

THE RED COTTAGE.

All these fine things were to be seen in Sacha's studio.

Now, Sacha's studio was allowed to be the prettiest room in all the house. Sacha said so herself, indeed, and she was an authority on decoration. And she said the truth. Such a queer little lop-sided, five-cornered, irregular nook of a room you never saw in all your life. It was built out from one angle of the external wall, and lighted up from the north side by a big square bay-window, which projected cornerwise, anyhow, into the lawn and orchard. It was quaint because it never aimed at quaintness; it achieved it unconsciously. And the outlook was charming, too, over the brook and the hillside; no more satisfying view, Sacha held, among the Surrey hills than the larches above and the pear-trees below as seen across the foreground of lavender and poppies from her studio window-seat at the Red Cottage. Throw in an easel or two, carelessly posed, a few soft Liberty draperies, a Lewis Day wallpaper, an Oriental rug, a great Japanese screen, and Aunt Julia's black silk gown (with Aunt Julia inside it) to give dignity to the foreground, and there, as well as this poor hand can draw it, you have a fair rough sketch of Sacha Cazalet's sanctum.

'For my part,' said Owen, straightening his arm and then bending it so as to display the biceps, 'I shouldn't mind a little rain. The heavier the ground is, the better my chances.'

Sacha looked up at him in his becoming running suit; he'd been sitting, or rather posing, for her as joint winner at the tape in her spirited picture of 'A Dead Heat—the Finish,' and she thought to herself as she looked, though he *was* her own brother, that a handsomer or finer-built or stronger-looking young man wasn't to be found that day in the length and breadth of England. She drew a deep breath, and added a delicate touch to the stiffened muscle of the straining forearm.

'But it'd be a pity,' she said, stepping back a pace and surveying her own work critically, 'if it rained while we're actually on the ground to-morrow. You men have no thought. Consider our nice new gowns, and hats, and feathers.'

'It's a dreadful waste of time,' Aunt Julia interposed, smoothing her immaculate white hair behind her blameless lace head-dress. 'I shall be glad when it's all over, I'm sure, and you get back to your books again, Owen. Young men of twenty ought to have something else to busy themselves about in the world, it seems to me, besides high jumps, and hundred yards, and half-miles, and hurdle races.'

Aunt Julia mentioned the very names of those offensive exercises with a certain high-sniffing dislike, and as if between unwilling quotation marks. A model district visitor, Aunt Julia, if ever there was one; a distributer of tracts and good counsel gratis; a pillar of orthodoxy; a prop of the University Central African Mission.

'Mr. Hayward approves of them,' Owen answered with the air of a man who stifles opposition by citing a crushing authority. 'I suppose you don't want me to neglect Mr. Hayward's wishes? He says what he desires above all things is to see me a typical English gentleman. Now, there's nothing more English than athletics, you'll admit, Aunt Julia. He's always delighted when he finds me going in hot and strong for cricket, and football, and boating. "Be cosmopolitan in your ideas," he

says to me always—"as cosmopolitan as you can make yourself; but be English in your pursuits, your costume, your habits."'

'I don't think he need be much afraid of *that*,' Sacha put in with a smile, washing her brush out in chloroform. 'You're English to the backbone, Owen; I could tell by the very build and set of your limbs you had true English blood in you.'

'Well, if it rains to-night,' Owen went on, releasing himself from his fatiguing pose, and flinging himself down like a young giant on the capacious window-seat, 'I shall pull off the mile; and, after all, that's the only event of the whole lot I really care twopence about.'

Aunt Julia's curiosity was so fully aroused by this unexpected avowal that she deigned for a moment to display a passing interest in athletics.

'Why, I thought,' she cried, astonished, 'you were certain of the long jump, and the half-mile, and the cricket-ball.'

'That's just it,' Owen replied, stretching his left arm in turn, and then retracting it suddenly. 'I'm safe as houses for those, and so I don't mind a bit about 'em. But I'm no good at all for the mile unless the ground's heavy. On light ground Charlie Skene's sure to beat me. If it rains there'll be a good race—like Sacha's picture there—and that's just what I love—won by a neck at the finish.' And he glanced at his own shapely limbs on his sister's canvas with not unnatural approbation of her handicraft or her model.

'Better go and put on your other clothes now,' Aunt Julia remarked with an undercurrent of doubt. She was never quite sure in her own mind whether it was exactly right for Sacha to paint even her own brother, let alone the professional model, in so light and airy a costume; besides which, those short sleeves must be conducive to rheumatism. Aunt Julia pinned her faith on the protective virtues of red flannel. If she'd had her own way, she'd have cased Owen from head to foot in that triple armour against assailing chills. But there! what can one do? Young people nowadays are so self-willed and obstinate!

Owen rose from the window-seat and shook himself like a big dog just released from the kennel.

'Well, they *are* rather chilly to sit in,' he admitted, reading Aunt Julia's mind, which, for the rest, was an open book with very few pages in it. 'I don't mind if I do go and put on my toggeries; but I'll just take a sharp trot first round the meadows to warm me.'

He stood with his hand on the door, on the point of starting, when a timid knock outside made him open it suddenly. Martha was standing there with an envelope on the salver. A well-trained servant, Martha. She knew it was as much as her place was worth to burst into the studio without leave while Miss Sacha was painting there. If there's anything on earth that's destructive to a work of art, in pigments or words, it's continual interruption in the midst of your working hours. And to disturb a model's pose, Sacha often remarked, is nothing short of criminal.

'What is it?' Owen asked, taking the envelope from the salver.

'Telegram, sir,' Martha replied. 'Boy's waiting below in the 'all for the answer.'

Owen read it, and bit his lips.

'Well, this *is* just annoying!' he cried. 'Who do you think's coming down? Mr. Hayward himself—and at twelve o'clock to-morrow.'

A sudden silence fell all at once upon the little listening group. They looked at one another and bit their lips in embarrassment. Clearly, some unexpected damper had been put at once upon all Owen's plans. Sacha was the first to break the awkward pause.

'At twelve,' she said musingly. 'And the sports, I think, begin at ten, don't they?'

'Nominally ten,' Owen answered, still regarding the telegram with a very rueful face, 'but that always means practically half-past ten or thereabouts. Punctuality's a virtue that hasn't been yet evolved. They take such a precious long time clearing the course and so forth.'

Sacha consulted the card of the sports and then the local time-table.

'You'd have time, if you liked, for the hundred yards,

and perhaps the long jump, too, before his train gets in,' she said, with as deep an interest as if thousands were at stake; 'and even then you could go down to the train in your flannels to meet him. But you'd miss the mile, and that you say 's the only event of the lot you care about.'

Sacha had lived long enough in an athlete's family, you see, to know that 'event' was the proper word to apply to these particular engagements.

Aunt Julia beamed horror through her scandalized spectacles.

'Why, you don't mean to say, Sacha,' she cried with what breath she could muster up from the depths of her outraged bosom, 'you thought Owen might go down to meet Mr. Hayward at the Moor Hill Station in those dreadful racing things?'

Sacha gazed up at her blandly.

'Yes I did, auntie,' she answered in that calm, soft voice of hers. 'That was exactly my idea. Why not? They're so becoming.'

The want of reverence for their elders in young people nowadays is positively something little short of appalling.

Aunt Julia gasped.

'Go . . . down . . . to the station . . . in those clothes?' she repeated, feebly gazing at Owen, open-mouthed. 'Oh! Sacha, how can you?'

Owen watched his sister's face askance to see what she'd answer. But that imperturbable young lady had made up her mind by this time.

'No, you had better not go, my dear,' she said promptly, after a short pause for consideration. 'Don't be at the station at all. Run your races exactly as if nothing had happened. Mr. Hayward 'll be pleased that you've trained and gone in for so many prizes. There's nothing he likes better than seeing you a thorough Englishman. Never mind about *him*. I'll run down to meet him myself, and bring him up to the field to you.'

'Sacha!' Aunt Julia ejaculated once more. It was all she could say. The situation was too dreadful. Words failed her to express herself.

But her niece was not a young woman to be turned from her purpose by the interjectional application of her own Christian name. She knew it already. She was three years older than Owen, and her character was more formed; besides, she was a professional artist and earned her own living. Your independent woman is a feature of this age. She has acquired initiative. She thinks and acts for herself, without the need for a father, a husband, or a brother to lean upon.

'Martha,' the independent woman said briskly, turning round to the maid, 'bring me a telegraph form from the dining-room.' And Martha flew down for it like one who knew that Miss Sacha at least would not be kept waiting.

The mistress of the studio sat down at her desk and filled it in:

'Delighted to see you to-morrow. Owen busy athletics. Will meet you at station myself, unless rain. Wire back if you wish Owen to stop away.

'SACHA CAZALET.'

She handed it across to her brother.

'Will that do?' she said quietly.

Owen stepped nearer and kissed her.

'You *are* a brick, Sacha,' he said, 'and no mistake! How splendidly you manage things! That's just the way to do it.'

'For my part,' Aunt Julia observed, glancing over his shoulder through her spectacles with the disapproving eye before which many a beer-absorbing labourer in the village had quailed in his shoes, 'I call it exceedingly disrespectful from a boy like Owen to a man in Mr. Hayward's position.'

'Oh, *he* won't mind,' Sacha answered, like one who knows her ground. 'He's a very odd man, of course. And he demands obedience. But he goes in above everything for making Owen athletic. It's the spirit, not the letter, Mr. Hayward cares about. He'll be delighted to come up to the grounds and see him run. Don't *you* be afraid, auntie. I'll make things all right with him, I promise you, at the station.'

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

As the 12.4 train steamed into Moor Hill Station next morning Sacha was there, to her word, in good time to meet it. A handsome, upstanding, self-contained sort of a girl, Sacha Cazalet, not unworthy in physique to be a crack athlete's sister. As she stood there on the platform, in her soft artistic dress and her wide-brimmed Rubens hat, with the calm, strong face beneath it, she looked as if she might have stepped that moment straight out of one of her own graceful and earnest pictures.

The train pulled up with a jerk. 'Mer-ill, Mer-ill, Mer-ill!' cried the porters in chorus in their accustomed shorthand, and a passenger or two, divining by good chance that these cabalistic sounds represented Moor Hill in the vernacular tongue, descended slowly from the carriages with bags, rugs, and bundles. Amongst them was one noticeable man in a rough tweed suit—tall, thin, and time-worn, but a typical aristocrat as to mien and features, with a clear-cut, statuesque, intellectual face, clean-shaven all over but for its heavy black moustaches. He came down, it is true, in a third-class carriage, and he had nothing in his hand but a stout untrimmed stick, which he had evidently cut for himself on some blackthorn-covered common; but he was none the less a gentleman confessed for all that—blue blood shone clear in his face, his walk, his tone, his gestures.

The noticeable man took Sacha's hand cordially, with a certain stately condescension, yet as one who liked her.

'So you came to meet me, Alexandra?' he said, smiling. 'That was awfully good of you. *Your* plan, of course. You did quite right to let Owen go off to his sports unmolested. I appreciated your telegram. But there! that's your way—you can always be depended upon.'

'I wish you wouldn't call me Alexandra,' the girl answered with a little shudder, yet taking his hand as cordially as he gave it. 'You know I hate the name. I always so much prefer to be known as Sacha.'

Mr. Hayward turned towards the gate and gave up his ticket.

'Alexandra's so much better, though,' he said slowly, in his soft, musical voice. 'It's good English now, since a princess brought it over. All English names come across to us in the last resort with a prince or princess. We haven't got a native one. William, and Henry, and John, and Robert, came over with the Conqueror; Ernest, and Augustus, and Caroline, and Sophia, came over with the Georges; Alexandra, and Olga, and Christian, and Dagmar came over with the very latest royal importations. But English snobbery seizes on them and adopts them at once. That's the English fashion. Whereas Sacha carries date, as you say about your gowns. People are sure to inquire when they hear it in what country of Europe Sacha's short for Alexandra. And *that*,' he paused a second, 'would interfere with my views for Owen's future.'

'I prefer the name I've always been called by myself,' Sacha interposed quietly, and then closed her lips short.

It was diamond against diamond with those two, both firm as a rock in their own fixed opinions.

Mr. Hayward answered nothing—at least, not directly.

'Owen Cazalet,' he murmured with a sigh, as if half to himself, rolling it over on his tongue—'Owen Cazalet, Owen Cazalet. Couldn't have anything that would sound much more British than that, I flatter myself. Though Owen's Welsh, to be sure, when one goes to the bottom of things, and Cazalet's Huguenot. But British enough as times go nowadays—British enough, Owen Cazalet.'

'For myself, I confess, if it weren't for business purposes,' Sacha replied obliquely, 'I should much prefer in many ways my own family name. I hate disguises. But of course, as I've got to be known now as Sacha Cazalet to picture-buyers and publishers, I must stick to it for the future. As an illustrator my practice depends largely on the name. It's a good trade-mark for the purpose, thank Heaven!—distinctive and striking. And I can't change it now unless some amiable young man chooses to offer me his, which doesn't seem likely in the present state of society.'

'Well, I'm glad you can't change it, my child,' Mr. Hayward said, not unkindly, looking down at her with eyes of unfeigned admiration. He was old enough to be her father, and he spoke to her always with a certain old-fashioned paternal courtesy, much as a Louis Quinze marquis of the stately type might have spoken before the Court to mademoiselle his daughter. 'It would be a pity if any such suggestion of un-English antecedents were to stand in the way of my plans for your brother's advancement.'

'It would,' Sacha replied. 'I admit it. I acquiesce in it.'

They walked on together to the cricket-field, where the sports were to be held, Mr. Hayward stopping every now and then with genuine delight in the country to admire some pretty spray of young bramble or cluster of hart's-tongue in the hedgerow. He had an artist's eye for nature, like Sacha's own. The tangled richness of the stitchworts and red-robins by the wayside seemed to charm and impress him.

'It's a sweet country,' he said at last, pausing and gazing deep into the recesses of the bush-grown bank. 'What exquisite depths of shade! What luscious richness of foliage!'

'Yes,' Sacha replied, in the same tone; 'such a struggle for life, too, isn't it? Each fighting for his own hand; each craning and straining to overtop the other. Like the world we live in.'

'As it stands now,' Mr. Hayward assented gravely—'a tangled maze, a mere unorganized thicket. Yet some day it might become an ordered and orderly garden.'

'That would be so much less picturesque, though,' Sacha suggested, sighing.

'Less picturesque? Yes, perhaps,' Mr. Hayward cried, like one who sees some vision of delight. 'But, oh! Sacha, what of that? More useful and more hopeful!'

As they reached the cricket-field Sacha glanced around for a moment to see where among the crowd of spectators Aunt Julia was seated. Her quick eye soon picked out

the immaculate white hair among a little group of local dignitaries near the centre by the pavilion. Mr. Hayward advanced and lifted his hat to Miss Cazalet with that indescribable air of courtly chivalry that was well-nigh inseparable from his smallest action. Aunt Julia received the bow with mingled respect and distant disapprobation. A strange sort of man, Mr. Hayward, not to be counted upon in some things; quite a gentleman in every sense of the word, of course; but somehow, to Aunt Julia's district-visiting type of mind, extremely awe-inspiring and not a little uncanny. She was never quite sure, if the truth must be told, as to Mr. Hayward's principles. And principles were to Aunt Julia, as to the British matron in general, objects of a distinct and almost idolatrous reverence.

Mr. Hayward joined the group, and fell into the conversation at once with the practised skill of a man of the world. They were discussing 'that dangerous book,' 'A Rural Idyll,' by Margaret Forbes, which Aunt Julia considered 'undermined the very groundwork of our social morality.'

Lady Beaumont, the county member's wife, lolling back on her chair, gave a languid assent; she'd read the story herself, and only remembered now she'd found it interesting; but as Miss Cazalet disapproved of it, why, of course, as politeness demanded, she disapproved in concert.

It was Miss Forbes they were talking about? Mr. Hayward asked, smiling curiously. Ah, yes, a very clever woman, too, and a bishop's daughter! What an irony of fate! He'd heard one or two good stories in town about her. Mrs. Forbes, the bishopess, was quite proud of the book's success; but, as her daughter remarked, 'If I hadn't written it, mamma wouldn't have touched it with a pair of tongs, you know.'

He knew her then, Lady Beaumont suggested, with a careless interest, from the chair beside Aunt Julia's.

Mr. Hayward waved a graceful and half-deprecatory negative. No, he didn't exactly know her—that's to say, not as on visiting terms—but from time to time he ran up against her in London drawing-rooms. Sooner or

later, in fact, one ran up against almost everybody worth knowing in any way. London's so small, you see; and the world's so shrunken nowadays.

Lady Beaumont glanced the mute inquiry with her languishing eyes: 'And, pray, who's your fine friend?' Aunt Julia introduced him with a rather awkward consciousness: 'Lady Beaumont: my nephew's guardian—you've heard me speak of him—Mr. Hayward.'

The county member's wife put up her long-handled tortoiseshell quizzing-glass, 'the aristocratic outrage' Sacha always called it, and surveyed Mr. Hayward for full fifty seconds with such a keen, searching glance as only your hardened woman of society dare ever bestow on a fellow-creature.

A plain Mister, then! She'd imagined him a general at least, if not a baronet or an honourable. Mr. Hayward stood it out calmly, unmoved and unconscious, with that imperturbable smile of his. Then he drew over a vacant chair with one well-bred hand, sat down upon it just behind them, and, as if on purpose to overcome some initial prejudice, began a delightful flow of the most amusing gossip. Even Lady Beaumont smiled often. He handled small-talk like a master. And how he knew his world, too!—Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Constantinople, the little German spas, the Norwegian fiords, the Dutch and Danish kurhauses, the Pyrenean watering-places. Who was there at Cannes whose whole domestic history he hadn't at his finger-ends? Who was there at Florence whose flirtations with the Marchese This or the Contessa That, as case and sex might be, he couldn't chronicle fluently? What family skeleton lurked secure in its native cupboard from his piercing scrutiny? And it wasn't all mere scandal and gossip, either. There was history in it as well; profound grasp of national life, profound knowledge of the twists and turns of human nature. For Mr. Hayward was a psychologist, and while he fitted his conversation to his hearers' intellects, he always let you feel through it all that he himself was something higher and bigger than the world he described—that he laughed in his sleeve all the while at its foibles and its follies.

As for Sacha, sitting beside him and listening silently, as was her wont—for she was restrained of nature and little given to speech—to his brilliant flow of witty society talk, she couldn't help wondering to herself now and again how a man so intelligent and so able as Mr. Hayward could possibly lower himself to so feeble a level, could waste himself contentedly on such an unworthy flow of pure human tittle-tattle. And Mr. Hayward, on his side, too, seemed to be conscious of her feeling, for with infinite tact, he managed to turn to her now and again, and add, as it were for her special benefit, a little aside containing some profounder reflection or some more interesting detail. Was it Madrid he was talking of? After he'd rattled on to Aunt Julia and Lady Beaumont of that famous bull-fight where the Duke of Medina-Coeli got his collar-bone broken, he went off at a tangent for ten minutes with a word or two to Sacha about the blaze of colour in the streets, or the Murillos in the Prado. Was it to Venice he'd got now? After describing, for the listening group in front, his adventure in a gondola with the editor of the *Fanfulla* and a Neapolitan prima donna, he diverged into a little private disquisition behind on the mosaics of St. Mark's and the Athenian lion at the gate of the Arsenal.

Altogether, 'A most well-informed man of the world,' Lady Beaumont thought to herself. 'Quite an acquisition for the day in our society at Moor Hill, in spite of his principles,' Aunt Julia reflected inwardly; and 'What a pity he wastes his talents so!' Sacha meditated with regret. But she was wrong, for all that. He wasn't wasting them—not a bit of it. That was his *rôle* in life. To be all things to all men—and all women, too—bettering even the comprehensive apostolic injunction—was the secret of his profession.

At last there came a pause, a sudden break in the flowing current. The mile was now on, and Sacha saw for herself that all the while, amid his gossip, though Mr. Hayward was so fluent of varied experiences in all corners of Europe, his eyes had none the less followed Owen perpetually round the field with quite as much eagerness and constancy as her own had done. At the

finish he bent his head forward for a moment in anxiety, then sprang from his chair in his joy.

'Bravo! bravo!' he cried, clapping his hands with unaffected delight as the tape fell forward. 'Owen wins! Owen wins! Well done, my boy! Well done! You must be proud of him, Miss Cazalet. A splendid race, and just carried by a fine spurt. I never saw anything better in my life than the magnificent way he did those last ten yards in!'

He sat down again, quite flushed with vicarious pride in his ward's success. His face was beaming.

'I wish I'd brought my little snap camera with me,' he cried, 'to take an instantaneous of that final dash-in. It was so beautiful, so perfect. The action of that boy's limbs, like a thoroughbred racer's—why, it's a picture to look at.'

At the words Lady Beaumont raised the class outrage once more, and took a second long stony stare at the well-informed stranger. Could it be? No, impossible! But, yes, she was sure of it. She couldn't be mistaken now. She'd suspected it from the very first, and in those words the man himself as good as admitted it. No colonel! No baronet! But a common man from a shop in London!

'I think,' she said very deliberately, in that glassy, cold voice of hers, 'I've seen you before, Mr. Hayward. You say one knocks up against almost everybody in town, and I've knocked up against you somewhere. Haven't we met—at a photographer's shop, I think—in Bond Street?'

Aunt Julia quailed. Sacha leant forward curiously. Lady Beaumont tapped her quizzing-glass on her knee with the air of a detective who unmasks a clever disguise. Mr. Hayward himself alone smiled on blandly as ever.

'Yes, I remember it perfectly,' he said, with, if possible, a still more self-possessed and high-bred air and manner than before. 'At Mortimer and Co.'s in Bond Street. I had the pleasure of a sitting from you for the *Gallery of Fashion*. I edit the series. My name's Lambert Hayward; but in Bond Street I'm known under the style and title of Mortimer and Co., photographers.'

There was an awkward pause, though only an infinitesimal one. Lady Beaumont flushed crimson. But Mr. Hayward was too perfect a conversationalist to let even such a point-blank thrust from a very clumsy hand mar the effect of his *causerie*. He went on with the subject at issue as unconcernedly as though Lady Beaumont were in the habit of dining every evening with her photographer.

'And instantaneous views are a perfect passion of mine,' he continued carelessly. 'I love to get a good subject, like Owen in that last spurt, or a yacht at the turning point, to catch a really graceful movement and record it in a lightning flash. You'd hardly believe, Lady Beaumont, how much skill and knowledge it requires to choose the exact instant when a figure in motion is at its picturesque best. But Sacha here knows it well. Even the most exquisite dancing has a great many intermediate points or passing attitudes that are artistically impossible. Only a few select poses are really useful for art, and those few must be discriminated and registered with incredible rapidity.'

'So I should think,' Sacha interposed, not unappreciative of the gracious tact of his tribute to her artistic taste, as well as the unusual concession implied in calling her by her pet name of Sacha; 'and I've often noticed, indeed, how much all instantaneous photographs, except yours, Mr. Hayward, are wanting for that very reason in spirit and vigour. The others look wooden, and unreal, and angular—yours alone are instinct with actual life and motion.'

'Ah, you look at them with an artist's eye, you see,' Mr. Hayward responded quietly; 'the more we understand the difficulties to be encountered and overcome in any art, however mechanical, the more do we learn to appreciate it and to respect its producers.'

Lady Beaumont leant back in her rough rush-bottomed chair, and knit her brows abstractedly. The problem was not yet solved, it was only intensified. Who on earth could he be, then, this strange high-bred-looking man, with the manners of a diplomatist and the acquirements of a *savant*, who yet turned out to be nothing

more, when one came to look into it, than a photographer in Bond Street? She remembered now she'd been struck when he 'took' her by his gentlemanly address and his evident knowledge. But she certainly never credited him then with the close familiarity with men and things which he'd shown in his rambling and amusing conversation that morning in the cricket-field.

CHAPTER III.

GUARDIAN AND WARD.

After a few minutes' more talk it struck Miss Cazalet suddenly that Mr. Hayward had only just come down from town, and would not improbably approve of a little light refreshment. Sacha and Lady Beaumont, however, refused his courtly offer of an escort to the luncheon tent, and were left behind on their seats as he strolled off carelessly across the grounds with Aunt Julia beside him.

'My dear Sacha,' Lady Beaumont began, as soon as he was well out of earshot, still following him through the quizzing-glass, 'what an extraordinary man! and what an extraordinary trade—or ought one to say profession? Why, till I recognised who he was, do you know, I took him for a gentleman.'

'So he is,' Sacha responded quietly, but with crushing force. 'A gentleman all over. I never met anybody who deserved the name better than our Mr. Hayward.'

She spoke with proprietary pride, as if the man belonged to her.

Lady Beaumont let drop the outrage, scanned her close with the naked eye, and then hedged prudently, as became a county member's wife, who must conciliate everybody.

'Oh, of course,' she said, with a slight drawl. 'A perfect gentleman—in voice and manners; one can see that at a glance, if only by the way he walks across the lawn. But I meant, I took him at first sight for some-

body really distinguished—not connected with trade, don't you know: a gentleman by birth and education and position. A military man, I fancied. You could have knocked me down with a feather, my dear, when he said right out he was a photographer in Bond Street.'

'*You* said it, you mean, not he,' Sacha answered sturdily. 'He wouldn't have obtruded his own affairs without due cause upon anybody. Though he's gentleman enough, if it comes to that, to be rather proud than ashamed of his business. But as to his being a gentleman by birth and position, so he is, too. I don't know much about his history—he's an awfully reticent man; but I know he's a person of very good family, and all that sort of thing, and has taken to photography partly from love of it, and partly because he'd lost by an unexpected reverse the greater part of his fortune.'

Lady Beaumont mused, and toyed nervously with the quizzing-glass.

'Well, of course, these are topsy-turvy times,' she said, nodding, with a candid air of acquiescence. 'One never knows what odd trade a gentleman born may take to nowadays. Lord Archibald Macnab's in a tea-broker's in the City, I'm told; Lady Browne keeps a bonnet-shop; and I went into an upholsterer's in Oxford Street the other day, and only learnt afterwards that the person who owns it, and sells pots and pans and wall-papers, is an Oxford man and a poet. . . . Still, I took Mr. Hayward, I must say, for something more than that—something *really* distinguished, don't you know. He has the manners of an Austrian count or an Italian prince. I should have thought him a foreigner, almost—though he speaks English perfectly—but a foreigner accustomed to the very highest society.'

'So he is,' Sacha retorted once more as stoutly as ever. No country baronet's wife should shake her allegiance to the Bond Street photographer. 'Not a foreigner, I don't mean, for he's an Englishman born, he tells me, but accustomed to mixing with the best people everywhere.'

'*Not* a foreigner?' Lady Beaumont repeated, rolling the words on her tongue with an interrogative quiver. 'Such stately manners as his are so rare in England.

We should think them too *empressés*. And how he trills his *r*'s, too! Have you noticed that trick of his? He says R'rome, per'rhaps, Sor'r'ento, char'rming.'

'He lived a good deal abroad as a boy, I believe,' Sacha answered, in the tone of one not anxious to continue the subject. 'He was partly brought up in Sweden, if I remember right; and he caught the trilled *r* there, and has never got over it since. But his English in all other ways is as good as yours and mine is.'

She might truthfully have added, as far as Lady Beaumont was concerned, 'and a great deal better too'; but she was prudent, and restrained herself.

When a man sees there's any subject you don't want to talk about, he avoids it instinctively, as a natural point of good manners. When a woman sees the same thing her curiosity's aroused at once, and she compels you to go on with it exactly in proportion as she finds you desire to evade her questions. Lady Beaumont saw Sacha didn't want to talk about Mr. Hayward, so of course she pressed her hard with more direct inquiries. That's what's known as feminine tact.

'He's your brother's guardian,' she said musingly, after a moment's pause. 'I suppose, then, he was a very great friend of your poor father's.'

Sacha winced almost imperceptibly, but Lady Beaumont was aware of it.

'Not exactly his guardian,' the girl answered after a short internal conflict. 'Not by my father's will, that is to say. He felt an interest in Owen, on poor papa's account, and he's done what he could for him ever since, so we *call* him his guardian.'

'Oh, indeed! Is he rich?' Point blank at Sacha's head, as only a woman of good society would dare to pose the question.

'I don't know; he never showed me his income-tax return. I should say that was a question entirely between himself and the Commissioners of Inland Revenue.'

It was straight from the shoulder as Sacha knew how to hit. But Lady Beaumont sat still and took it smiling,

not being quick enough or agile enough indeed to dodge it lightly.

'Well, does he *seem* rich, then?' she persisted, as unperturbed as if Sacha were charmed with her conversation. 'Does he spend money freely? Does he live well and handsomely?'

'He spends very little on himself, I should say,' Sacha answered somewhat curtly, 'and a great deal upon other people. But he's not a communicative man. If you want to know all about him, why not ask him direct? You did, you know, about the photographer's shop in Bond Street.'

Lady Beaumont looked up at her with a face of impassive scrutiny. For so young a woman, this painting girl was really most self-possessed. But the county member's wife was not to be sat upon by an artist, however large and well built.

'Owen's going into the diplomatic service, I think Miss Cazalet told me,' she began again after a strategic pause.

'Into the diplomatic service. Yes. If he can get in,' Sacha admitted grudgingly, for she hated to let out any further information.

Lady Beaumont poked her parasol into the turf at her feet and egged out a root of grass or two in a meditative fashion.

'It's a curious service for a young man to go in for, unless he's really rich, or at the very least has expectations in the future,' she remarked in the air, abstractedly. 'They get no pay at all, you know, for the first two or three years, and they must spend more as *attachés* than their salary amounts to.'

'So I believe,' Sacha replied, without moving a muscle of that handsome round face of hers. 'It's a service for rich young men, I've always been given to understand. A career, not a livelihood. Honour and glory, not filthy lucre.'

'Then, why does Owen go in for it?' Lady Beaumont asked straight out, with that persistent inquisitiveness which some women of the world think so perfectly becoming.

'I don't know,' Sacha replied. 'He is of age. Ask him. Perhaps it may be because Mr. Hayward wishes it.'

'Oh!' Lady Beaumont said shortly. She'd got what she wanted now. A rich relation, no doubt, of whom they were all ashamed, and whose money they expected to get, while disowning his business.

The talk glided off by degrees into other channels. By-and-by Aunt Julia and Mr. Hayward returned. They brought with them a third person—that Brazilian from Bahia with the very curly hair who was stopping with the Fergussons at Ashley Towers. Mr. Hayward was discoursing with him in very fluent French. At that Lady Beaumont pricked her ears up to hear what he said. She couldn't follow it all—her ear for spoken French was still a trifle untrained; but she heard a good deal, and took the rest in instinctively (which is why women learn languages so much quicker than men). 'Perfectly, monsieur,' the mysterious photographer was remarking in that clear bell-like voice of his. 'This is an age of *trains de luxe*. To live in the world to-day you must follow the world as it flits across four flying continents. It's a common British mistake of ours to suppose the universe stops short at the English Channel. Error, error, error! It even extends beyond Paris and Switzerland. Most Englishmen fancy they know the world if they know London, Brighton, Ascot, Scarborough, and Newmarket. For my part, M. le Conte, early acquaintance with the Continent saved me, happily, from that inexact idea. I know that if you want to keep up with the movement you must march with it as it marches at Vichy to-day, at Baden-Baden to-morrow, at Nice, Monte Carlo, Pau, Carlsbad, the next day. So I took the hint and followed up your ex-Emperor from Cannes to Algiers, till I caught him at last on the slope of Mustapha Supérieur.' The rest she couldn't hear. It was but a passing snatch as he strolled by her chair. But it was enough at least to impress Lady Beaumont profoundly with a sense of Mr. Hayward's prodigious mastery of colloquial French, and astonishing ease in framing his thoughts into words in all languages equally.

Was he a Frenchman, then, she wondered, and was that why his *r*'s had that peculiar trill in them?

To be sure, an acute Parisian ear (like yours and mine, dear reader) might have noticed at once that as in English Mr. Hayward trilled his *r*'s, so in French his *an*'s, his *en*'s, and his *on*'s were very ill distinguished. But, then, Lady Beaumont hadn't had *our* educational advantages. To her dull English ear, his spoken French was exactly a Frenchman's.

As she sat and pondered, Owen strolled up to the group looking glorious in his running clothes—a young Greek god, hot and flushed from his victories. Even on Sacha's placid face a ruddy spot of pleasure glowed bright as her brother drew near, like a statue come to life; while, as for Mr. Hayward, he stepped forward to meet the hero of the day with such graceful cordiality as a prince might show to one of his noblest subjects.

'My dear boy,' he said, laying his hand on the young man's shoulder with a half-caressing movement, 'you won that mile splendidly. 'Twas a magnificent spurt. I was proud of you as I looked at you, Owen—very proud of you as I looked at you.'

Lady Beaumont's steely eyes were turned on the pair, watching warily.

'Thank you, Mr. Hayward,' the young man answered in a modest tone, but with genuine pleasure, as an affectionate boy might answer his father. 'If you're pleased, that's all I want. But I hope you didn't mind my not meeting you at the station?'

'Mind!' Mr. Hayward repeated quickly. 'Mind! Why, I should have been most grieved, my boy, if you'd missed one fraction of these sports on my account. But Sacha knew best. One can always trust Sacha. She explained to me when we met, and I agreed with her entirely. To see you win such a magnificent lot of prizes as this is all I ask of you.'

'But his work?' Aunt Julia suggested, aghast—'his books, his reading, Mr. Hayward? Don't you think these things tend to unsettle a young man for examinations?'

Mr. Hayward turned round and gazed blandly and benignly at her.

'I should have read Owen's character very ill indeed,' he said with a curious smile, 'if I thought anything could unsettle him from a resolve once made. He's true as steel, is Owen. If you want men to do well, first begin by trusting them. That's the freeman's way. The other is both the curse and the Nemesis of despotism.'

What a very odd man! Lady Beaumont thought to herself; and how sententiously he spoke! What a bore, too, if you saw much of him! For women of Lady Beaumont's type invariably think anybody a dreadful bore who makes a generalized remark, or who talks about anything else in heaven or earth but the gossip of the narrow little set they mix in.

CHAPTER IV.

DIPLOMATIC DISCIPLINE.

An hour or two later they were taking tea together in Sacha's sacred studio, at the round table made out of the Cairene wood-work stand, surmounted by the old Moorish chased brass tray that Mr. Hayward had brought her on one of his voyages to Tunis.

The treasures of the household, indeed, had been ransacked to do honour to Mr. Hayward. Aunt Julia had brought out the best silver teapot with the Cazalet arms on it, and the George III. apostle spoons that belonged to her grandmother fifty years ago in Devonshire. Cook had produced some of her famous brown rolls, and had surpassed her well-known skill in the home-made rusks and buttered Canadian tea-cake. Martha's little French cap was crimped and starched with unwonted care, and her apron with the white lace was even more spotless than usual. Sacha herself had put the very daintiest of her sketches on the easel by the square bay-window, and festooned fresh sprays of trailing clematis and long stems of wild bryony from the Venetian bowl in hammered

copper that hung by a wrought-iron chain from a staple in the corner. The studio, in short, was as picturesque as Sacha knew how to make it; for Mr. Hayward's visits were few and far between, and all the household made the more of them for the rarity of their occurrence.

Yet a certain visible constraint brooded over the whole party none the less while they drank their tea out of Sacha's Satsuma cups; for it was an understood thing that Mr. Hayward never came down to Moor Hill except for some good and sufficient reason; and what that reason might be, nobody liked to ask him, though, till he chose to disclose it himself, they sat on tenterhooks of painful expectation.

At last, however, Mr. Hayward laid down his cup, and turned for a moment to Owen.

'And now, my boy,' he said quietly, as though everybody knew beforehand the plan he was going to propose, 'will you be ready to set out with me to-morrow morning?'

'Certainly,' Owen answered at once, with a great air of alacrity. 'To-night, if you like. I can go and pack my portmanteau this minute, if necessary, or start without it.'

Mr. Hayward smiled approval.

'That's right,' he said, nodding assent. 'Quite right, as far as it goes, and shows promptitude in some ways. I'd half a mind to telegraph to you yesterday to come up then and there, just to test your obedience. But I'm glad now I didn't. It would have grieved me to have done you out of this morning's triumphs. This is all so good for you.'

'If you had,' Owen said simply, 'I'd have come straight up, of course, though it *would* have been a wrench, I don't deny. But it's wrenches, after all, that are the true test of discipline.'

Mr. Hayward smiled once more.

'Quite so,' he answered, with evident pleasure. 'You're a good boy, Owen—a boy after my own heart. And in most things I approve of you. But remember, *point de zèle*. Zeal often spoils everything. That was unneces-

sary that you said just now, "to-night, if you like"; nobody asked you to go to-night. I said, to-morrow morning. A well-trained subordinate answers, "Certainly; at what hour?" but never suggests to-night. That's no part of his province.' He paused for a moment and gazed hard with searching eyes at Sacha. 'These things are important,' he added, musing, 'as disciplinary preparation for the diplomatic service.'

'I'll remember it, Mr. Hayward,' Owen answered submissively.

'For the diplomatic service,' Mr. Hayward went on, 'a man needs for the most part not zeal, but discretion. Zealous subordinates you can find any day in the streets by the dozen; a discreet one you may search for over two-thirds of Europe. Obedience you've learnt already, my boy; discretion you've got to learn now. No offering to go and pack your portmanteau at once—it isn't demanded of you—still less, protestations of willingness to start without one.'

He spoke austerely, but kindly, with a tender, fatherly ring in his voice, like one who would correct a fault without giving needless pain to the pupil.

'I see,' Owen answered, abashed. 'I was wrong, of course. I ought to have gone without a portmanteau at once, if you summoned me; but not have effusively offered to go without one when I wasn't called upon to do so.'

Mr. Hayward's eyes sparkled with suppressed pride and pleasure. A very apt pupil this, quick to accept reproof where he saw it was deserved, and to mend his ways accordingly. He laid that friendly hand upon the young man's shoulder again.

'Quite right, Owen,' he said. 'You'll make a diplomat yet! . . . We shall see him ambassador at Constantinople before we die, Miss Cazalet. . . . But you haven't asked yet where you're to go to, my boy. Don't you want to know about it.'

Owen hesitated a moment.

'I thought discretion dictated that I should wait till I was told,' he answered, after a long pause, during which Sacha's eyes were fixed firmly upon him.

The Bond Street photographer smiled that strange smile of success and satisfaction once more.

'Right again, my boy,' he said, well pleased. 'You answer as you ought to do. Then you shall know your destination to-morrow evening.'

Aunt Julia gave a little start of surprise and regret.

'But aren't we to know where he's going, Mr. Hayward?' she cried. 'Aren't we to know where we can write to him?'

Mr. Hayward turned round upon her with a coldly contemptuous look in his keen brown eyes. His manner towards Aunt Julia was always markedly different from his manner to Owen and Sacha. Its stately courtesy never quite succeeded in concealing the undercurrent of contempt for the district visitor within her.

'It was in our bargain,' he said, 'Miss Cazalet—which Owen, at least, has always loyally kept—that I might take him for a month at a time, twice a year, when I chose, to live with me, or travel with me wherever I liked, in order to retain such a hold as I desired both over his education and over his character and affections. It was never specified that I should tell you beforehand when or where it suited me he should pass those two months with me. It was only arranged that at the end of each such holiday I should restore him once more to your own safe keeping. Two months out of twelve is surely not excessive for me to ask for myself, especially as Owen is happiest when he's away on his trips with me.'

The tears came up into Aunt Julia's eyes. Long since she had repented of that most doubtful bargain. She even wondered at times whether Mr. Hayward was some modern embodiment of Mephistopheles, and whether she had sold Owen's soul to him, as Esau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. It frightened her when she heard him talk so much of running about Europe in *trains de luxe*. It reminded her always of the Book of Job, and of the high personage who presented himself at the court of heaven 'from going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.'

'I should certainly have liked to know where Owen

was likely to be,' Aunt Julia murmured, struggling hard with her voice and her tears. 'It's a pull to give him up without even knowing where he's gone to.'

Owen turned to her tenderly.

'Well, but, auntie,' he said in his manly voice, always full of English cheeriness, 'you know I won't get into any harm with Mr. Hayward, and for myself, I really like best the element of adventure and surprise—the never knowing till I get there where it is I'm going to.'

The love of adventure and surprise, however, is poorly developed in the British old maid or in the British matron. But Mr. Hayward had carried his point, and could afford to relent now.

'Go upstairs, Owen,' he said, 'and put your things together at once. I'm not sure, after all, I won't start off this evening.'

'And we've got dinner for you, and everything!' Aunt Julia exclaimed appealingly.

She'd made a cream pudding. Her housewifely heart was stirred to its depth by this bitter disappointment.

But Owen ran upstairs with cheerful promptitude. It was clear Mr. Hayward had a very firm hold over him—a hold gained not so much by command as by affection. As soon as he was gone their visitor closed the door behind him.

'Miss Cazalet,' he said in that clear and very musical voice of his, 'I've never been unreasonable. I made a bargain with you and Owen for Owen's clear advantage, but I've never abused it. While he was at school I took care not to break in upon his terms; I even allowed his schooling to take precedence of his education; I only claimed him in the holidays, and then he learned more from me in those two short months than in the other ten from his books and his masters. Since he left school I've been more irregular, but always for a good reason. I've a good reason now, though I don't choose to communicate it. However, I don't mind telling you privately where I'm going, if you and Alexandra—I beg your pardon, my child, Sacha I mean—won't mention it to Owen before we start. . . . I'm contemplating a month's tour in the mountains of Morocco.'

Aunt Julia drew a deep breath of relief. She knew nothing about Morocco, to be sure, except the bare name; and she had a vague idea that the majority of its inhabitants were engaged in the book-binding trade and the exportation of leather; but it was a comfort to her, all the same, to know exactly on the map where Owen was going to.

'Morocco,' she reflected, much consoled. 'Morocco. Morocco. And shall we be able to write to him while he's gone? Will you give us your address there?'

'There will be *no* address,' Mr. Hayward answered curtly. 'No addresses of any sort.'

'Not even *poste restante*?' Aunt Julia interposed.

Mr. Hayward smiled a broad smile.

'Not even *poste restante*,' he replied, unbending at the bare idea. 'We shall be up in the mountains all the time, among pathless wilds, and in small native villages. Posts are unknown, and inns of any sort unheard of. I want to do some photography of the untouched Moorish world, so I shall make at once for the remotest interior.'

'Owen will like that!' Sacha put in, well pleased. 'It'll exactly suit him. There'll be mountain climbing, of course, and, as he says, an element of excitement and adventure.'

'Precisely,' Mr. Hayward answered; 'just why I'm taking him there. I want to train his body and mind to familiarity with danger. Your father was a brave man, Sacha. I want Owen to be like him.'

'Owen is,' Sacha said proudly. 'As brave as they're made. He takes after his father in that. Or else your training's been successful.'

'Well, it's a comfort to think, anyhow, that if anything goes wrong in Morocco while he's there,' Aunt Julia said with a sigh, 'we shall know at least that dear Owen's in the midst of it.' Which is a feminine form of delight, but a very common one.

CHAPTER V.

'CHERCHEZ LA FEMME.'

GUARDIAN and ward stood on the deck of a Cunard Mediterranean liner before Owen had an inkling of their real destination. This uncertainty, indeed, exactly suited his adventurous athlete mind. He liked to set out not knowing whither he was bound, and to wake up some fine morning in a new world of wonders. Overflowing with life and youth and health and spirits, he found in such a tourist surprise party an irresistible attraction. He was wafted to his Bagdad as on some enchanted carpet. It would have spoilt half the fun for him if he knew beforehand where he was going, or why; and, besides, with Mr. Hayward he was always happy. He preferred this sailing under sealed orders.

Oh, the change to him, since boyhood upwards, from Aunt Julia's petticoat *régime* and perpetual old-maidish restraint at the Red Cottage to the freedom and breeziness of Mr. Hayward's holiday! For Mr. Hayward had designed it so, and had succeeded admirably. A boy hates to live under a woman's restrictions, and loves to have a man in authority over him. Mr. Hayward took advantage of that natural instinct of boy psychology to bind Owen to himself by strong ties of affection and gratitude. With Aunt Julia education was one long categorical 'Don't'; her sole part of speech was the imperative negative. Don't try to climb trees; don't speak in that voice; don't play with those rude boys; don't wear out your shoes, or the knees of your knickerbockers. With Mr. Hayward, on the contrary, education consisted in a constant endeavour to find out and encourage every native instinct: If that pleases you, my boy, why, do it by all means; if that irks you, never mind, you can get on in the end very well without it. From Mr. Hayward, or with Mr. Hayward, Owen had learnt French at odd times without being conscious of learning it; he had learnt history and politics, and knowledge of common things; optics and photography, and all the allied arts

and sciences; geography in action; a mass of general information taken in at the pores, and all the more valuable because acquired *con amore*. That was what Mr. Hayward meant by 'not allowing his schooling to interfere with his education.' The boy had learnt most and learned best in his holidays.

Obedience, if you will; yes, Mr. Hayward desired the promptest obedience. But it was the willing obedience the disciple renders of his own accord to the master he adores, not the slavish obedience a broken spirit tenders to a despotic martinet. Liberty first, order afterwards. Mr. Hayward would rather ten thousand times see Owen rebel than see him give in without a struggle to unreasonable authority. As a matter of fact, Owen often rebelled against Aunt Julia's strict rules; and when he did so Mr. Hayward upheld him in it stoutly.

On this particular journey, even after they got outside the bar of the Mersey, Owen had still no idea whither on earth they were bound, save that their destination was somewhere in the Mediterranean. He learned the exact place by accident. A fellow-passenger, leaning over the taffrail, asked Mr. Hayward carelessly, 'Alexandria?'

'No, Tangier,' the mysterious man answered. 'My friend and I are going on a tour in the Morocco mountains. I want to do a little photography there—take unhackneyed Islam.'

Owen's heart leapt up at the sound; but he gave no overt token. Mountaineering in Morocco! How delightful! How romantic! Arabs, Atlas, Adventure! The very thing to suit him.

'Dangerous work,' the fellow-passenger observed, with a languid yawn, 'sketching and photographing. Shock these fellows' religious prejudices; and Jedburg justice is the rule. "Off with his head," says the Cadi.'

'So I hear,' Mr. Hayward answered calmly. 'They tell me you mustn't try to take a snap at a mosque, in particular, unless you can do it unobserved. If the natives catch you at it, they're pretty sure to resent the insult to their religion, and cut your throat as a work of unobtrusive piety.'

'What larks!' Owen thought to himself. 'This is just what I love. A spice of danger thrown in! And I've always heard the Morocco people are fanatical Mohammedans.'

And, indeed, he enjoyed his first week or two on African soil immensely. From the moment he set foot in Tangier—that tangled Tangier—he found himself at once in a fairyland of marvels. More eastern than the east, Morocco still remains free from the vulgarizing admixture of a foreign element which spoils Algiers and Cairo and Constantinople. But Owen had never touched on Islam at all before; and this sudden dip into pure Orient at one plunge was to him a unique and glorious experience. He was sorry to tear himself away from the picturesque narrow alleys and turbaned Moors of Tangier, even for the promised delights of the wild interior. But Mr. Hayward's arrangements for his tour in the Atlas were soon completed; the protection of the Shereefian umbrella was granted in due form, and they set out, after three days, for the mountains of the black country.

Owen was not at all surprised to find as they journeyed inland, that Mr. Hayward spoke Arabic fluently. On the contrary, it would have astonished him much more if his guardian had proved ignorant of any known language, Oriental or Western. Mr. Hayward chatted easily with their Moorish escort, a soldier of the Sultan's, as they marched along single file, each mounted on a good native saddle-horse, through the narrow bridle-paths which constituted the sole roads in Morocco

The British Consul at Tangier had procured them the services of an official escort, and had further supplied them with a firman from his Shereefian Majesty, enjoining on all and sundry to show them on their way every respect and kindness. Travelling was safe in the interior just now, the escort assured them; for, Allah be praised! the Sultan's health was excellent. When the Sultan was ill, of course it was very different; things got unsettled up country then, and it was dangerous for foreigners to venture too far from the coast and their consuls. In Ramadan, too, during the month of fasting, Europeans found it risky to travel about freely. The faithful of the

town got crusty with their enforced abstinence, and their religious feelings were deeply stirred at that time; they let them loose, the escort remarked, with engaging frankness, on the passing infidels. Up country, you see, the people are so little accustomed to foreign effendis. At Tangier we are more civilized; we have learned to make trade with them.

It had been hot at Tangier, for it was full summer in England; but up on the high mountains of the interior they found the season cool, with a spring-like freshness. Owen never enjoyed anything better than that free, wild life, climbing crags through the long day, camping out in quaint Berber huts through the short nights, with none but natives and their cattle for society. And the danger gave it zest, for, in spite of the Sultan's firman, they could only photograph by stealth or under constant peril of angry and hostile expostulation.

About their fifth evening out from Tangier, an hour before sunset, as they were sitting in the courtyard of a rude native inn at a place called Ain-Essa, where they proposed to pass the night, as guests of the village, they were surprised by the approach of a pair of travellers in the costume of the country. One was a handsome young man in an embroidered Moorish jacket and loose white trousers, wearing a fez on his head, around which protruded great fluffy masses of luxuriant chestnut hair, reminding one somewhat of the cinque-cento Florentines. Though not more than the middle height, the stranger yet looked tall and well made, and Owen remarked at once with a professional eye that he had in him the makings of a very tolerable athlete. The other, who seemed his servant, was an older and heavily-bearded man, clad in the common green coat and dirty white turban of the Moorish groom or stable-boy.

The younger traveller of the two jumped from his horse very lightly. He rode well and sprang with ease, like an accomplished gymnast. As he flung his reins to his servant, he said, in decent French:

'*Tiens*, take my horse, Ali; I'll go into the *auberge*, and see if they can give us accommodation this evening.'

The sound of a European tongue in that remote moun-

tain village took Mr. Hayward aback. He rose from the divan where he sat, and, lifting his hat to the young man, crossed over to the servant, while the new-comer, with easy assurance, strolled into the front-room of the native inn.

'Monsieur est Français?' he asked the man who had been addressed as Ali.

The Arab shook his head.

'Non, Anglaise,' he answered curtly.

'Anglais?' Mr. Hayward corrected, thinking Ali's command of French didn't extend as far as genders, and that he had substituted the feminine for the masculine in error.

But Ali was not to be shaken so lightly from his first true report.

'Non, non,' he repeated; 'Anglaise, vous dis-je; Anglaise, Anglaise, Anglaise. It's a woman, not a man. It pleases her to ride about through the interior that way.'

Owen looked up quite crestfallen.

'You don't mean to say she travels alone, without an escort, with nobody to take care of her except you?' he asked the man in French.

The Algerian—for he was one—nodded a quiet assent.

''Tis mademoiselle's fancy,' he said. 'She likes to go her own way. And she goes it, I can tell you. Nobody would ever get mademoiselle to do anything she didn't want to.'

Owen gazed appealingly at his guardian.

'This is too bad, Mr. Hayward!' he cried. 'We've a soldier to protect us. And a girl goes alone. We must dismiss our escort. It's a shame for us to be beaten like that by a woman.'

'You're quite right,' Mr. Hayward answered. 'If she can go alone, why, so can we. I'll dismiss our man to-morrow, and I'm glad you took it so.'

In a few minutes more the stranger strolled out casually into the courtyard again. She had a frank, free face, yet not really masculine when one came to look into it, and the great crop of loose, chestnut hair, blowing about it in the breeze, gave it a very marked air of loose grace and carelessness.

'I beg your pardon,' she said in pure English, her voice betraying at once the open secret of her sex, 'but I hear from the man who keeps this place you've got his only two rooms. I'm sorry to interfere with you, but would you mind occupying one together, just this evening, to let me have the other. It's a long pull at this hour of night to Taourist, the next station.'

She spoke as calmly and familiarly as if she were in an English hotel, and as if a lady got up in male Arab costume were everywhere a common object of the country. Mr. Hayward glanced at her and smiled, raising his hat the while with his usual stately courtesy.

'With pleasure,' he said, motioning her to a seat on the divan by the door. 'If there's anything at all we can do for you we shall be only too happy. You're English, of course, as I gather from your accent.'

The problematical young person took a seat on the divan in the shade, and removed her fez for coolness, displaying as she did so all the wealth of chestnut hair that had before been but vaguely suspected by the fringe that escaped from it.

'More English than anything else, I suppose,' she said brightly, leaning back as she spoke and loosening her native slippers; 'though I haven't a drop of English blood in my body, if it comes to that. But I'm a British subject, any way; and my native tongue's English. I'm a little bit of everything, I believe—except Turk, thank heaven! but my name's mostly Greek; it's Ionê Dracopoli.'

'A very pretty name, too,' Owen put in, half-abashed. 'My friend's is Hayward, and mine's Owen Cazalet.'

'Why, then, you must be Sacha's brother!' Miss Dracopoli cried, enchanted. 'You are? How delightful! Sacha and I used to go to the School of Art together. You never heard her speak of me, did you — Ionê Dracopoli?'

'No, never,' Owen answered. 'But she knows so many girls in London, of course,' he added apologetically. 'You don't mean to say you're travelling alone in Morocco like this? You've come all the way from Tangier with nobody but this servant?'

'Not from Tangier,' Miss Ionê answered, enjoying his amazement immensely; 'much further than that. All the way from Oran, in French Algeria. Yes, I've ridden across the mountains on my own hired horse, just with Ali to take care of me. The French people at Oran talked a pack of nonsense about its being impossible for anybody to get along beyond the frontier without an escort. "Very well, then," said I to the *sous-prefet* or somebody—a fat, smiling old gentleman with a red ribbon in his button-hole and a perfect genius for shrugging his shoulders and saying, "Mais, non, mademoiselle, impossible"—"I never care to attempt anything myself unless it's impossible. What's possible's easy. What's impossible's amusing." He shrugged his shoulders again and said, "Another of these mad English. Thank heaven, if she's killed it'll be beyond the frontier." But he let me go, all the same.'

And Ionê smiled, triumphant at the memory of the encounter.

'And you've had no difficulties by the way?' Mr. Hayward asked, astonished.

Ionê threw her head back and showed a very pretty neck. Her face was daintily rounded, and her teeth, when she smiled, were two rows of pure ivory.

'Difficulties?' she echoed. 'Difficulties? Dear me, yes; thank goodness I've had nothing but difficulties. Why, what else do you expect? Where'd be the fun of coming so far and facing so much discomfort, I should like to know, if it were all plain sailing, like a canter across the Brighton downs? It was the difficulties that drew me, and I've not been disappointed.'

Owen stared hard at her and listened with profound interest and admiration. Mr. Hayward, gazing alarmed, noted the sparkle in his eye. This was indeed a girl after Owen's own heart, he felt sure. So he registered a solemn resolution in his own mind to find out that night which way Miss Dracopoli was going on the morrow, and to start himself on the opposite one. For there's nothing more likely to turn a man from any fixed resolve in life than that first stumbling-block of our race, from Adam

downward—a woman. And Mr. Hayward had far other designs in his head for Owen Cazalet than to let him fall a victim betimes to any Ionê Dracopoli.

CHAPTER VI.

A CRITICAL EVENING.

THEY sat there some time and talked, the pretty stranger in the Moorish costume detailing to them meanwhile in further outline her chief adventures by the way—how she'd been refused at every native hut in the village here, and made to sleep in the open air, under the fig-trees, there, and turned away altogether from whole tribal lands elsewhere. It was a curious, eventful tale, and once or twice it grew exciting; but Miss Ionê herself, overflowing with youthful spirits, told it all, from the humorous side, as a capital joke, and now and again made them laugh heartily by the quaint drollness of her comments.

At the end of it all she rose, quite unabashed and untroubled by her wide Turkish trousers, and, with an airy wave of the hand observed:

'I must go inside now, and see what our landlord can do for me in the way of supper. I'm hot and dusty with my ride. I must have a good wash. There's nothing on earth so delicious, after all, when you've got beyond the Southern limit of tubs, as a big bowl of cold water at the end of a long day's journey.'

As soon as she was gone, Mr. Hayward looked at Owen.

'Well?' he said slowly.

'Well?' Owen answered, perusing his boots.

'What do you think of her?' Mr. Hayward asked, trembling.

'She's certainly pretty,' Owen admitted, hot and red.

And neither said a word more. But Mr. Hayward felt an unwonted thrill of premonitory discomfiture.

Half an hour later, Ionê emerged again. She had taken off her embroidered jacket meanwhile, and now

displayed underneath it a sort of loose white shirt, of some soft silky material, which gave her a more feminine air, and showed off to greater advantage that full, smooth, snowy neck of hers. Her short but flowing hair rippled gracefully round her temples. She came out to them, trilling to herself a few bars of a joyous French song, 'C'est ça-tarra-larra.'

'Well, this is better,' she cried, looking round at the pink glow of the Southern sunset on the bare white-washed walls, and shaking her locks free from her forehead, on the faint mountain breeze. 'I'm cool again now. They'll give us something to eat out here before long, I suppose. Better here than in that stuffy little living-room inside. I'm not particular as to furniture, or food either, thank goodness! but fresh air seems to come rather expensive in Morocco.'

She was like fresh air herself, Owen felt instinctively. Something so open and breezy about her face, her voice, her walk, her manner. The ideal of young Hellas come to life again by a miracle in our workaday, modern, industrial world. She looked as if no taint of this sordid civilization of ours had ever stained or sullied her Greek Naiad nature.

'I've asked them to serve us what they can in the open court,' Mr. Hayward said dubiously. 'You're used to their fare by this time, no doubt, so I won't apologize for it.'

'I should think so!' the girl answered, pulling her shirt loose as she spoke, with another sunny smile. 'Very good fare, too, in its way, though not luxurious; dried figs and milk, and olive-oil, and cous-cous. It's such a comfort to feel one's left fish-knives and doilies altogether behind one, and that there isn't a pair of asparagus-tongs anywhere nearer than Oran.'

'Perhaps,' Owen began, rising from his seat, and looking timidly towards Mr. Hayward, 'Miss Dracopoli would prefer——'

'I beg your pardon,' their new acquaintance put in quickly, interrupting him. 'I'm not Miss Dracopoli. I object to these meaningless pure courtesy titles. My name's Ionê.'

'But I can't say Ionê to a lady I never met in my life before to-night,' Owen responded, almost blushing.

'Why not?' the pretty stranger answered, with most engaging frankness, 'especially as you'll most likely never see me again in your life, after to-morrow.'

Mr. Hayward looked up sharply. He was glad to hear that welcome suggestion. But Owen only bowed, and received the hint in regretful silence.

'Well, if I were a man, you see,' Ionê went on, composing herself on the divan in Owen's place, with her feet under her, Oriental fashion, 'I'd get other men, of course, to call me Dracopoli. But a girl can't quite do that. It's unfeminine, and women, I think, should always be womanly; so the only way out of it is to say, frankly, Ionê.'

'So universal a privilege is t.. ..ss likely to be highly prized,' Mr. Hayward said sententiously.

'Exactly,' Ionê answered, leaning forward, all alert, and opening her palms before her demonstratively. 'That's just the point of it, don't you see? It prevents stupid nonsense. I'm all for social freedom myself; and social freedom we girls can only get when women insist in general society upon being accepted as citizens, not as merely women. What I've always held about our future——'

But before she could get any further in her voluble harangue the landlord of the little inn, if one may venture to give the village guest-house such a dignified name, appeared in the court with the single tray which contained their dinner. He was the *amine* or headman of the little mountain community, and after serving the meal he and his friends stood by, as native politeness demands, not to partake of the food, but to do honour to their guests, and to enliven them with conversation. From the talk that ensued, Owen, who, of course, spoke no Arabic, was wholly cut off; but Mr. Hayward and Ionê chatted away complacently. Every now and again, too, the *amine* would take up some cous-cous, or a morsel of roast kid, in his dusky fingers, and as a special mark of distinguished consideration thrust it bodily into their mouths—the Oriental equivalent for 'Do let me tempt

you with another slice of turkey.' Owen felt it a hard trial of his courtesy to gulp down these greasy morsels from those doubtfully washen hands; but he noticed with admiration that Ionê Dracopoli received them all with every outward expression of appreciation and delight, and he marvelled much himself at the young lady's adaptiveness.

'What a power of accommodating yourself to circumstances you must have!' he cried at last to her, in an unobtrusive aside. 'I can't put on a smiling face at those great greasy boluses of his. How on earth do you manage it?'

Ionê laughed lightly.

'Habit, I suppose,' she answered, with a sunny glance at the *amine*. 'That's how I rub along so well with these half-barbarous people. I'm accustomed to giving way to their crude native ideas, and so I seldom get into any serious bothers with them; and though I travel alone, they never dream of insulting me, even if they're a bit churlish or suspicious sometimes. And then, besides, I dare say, my ancestry counts for a great deal. I'm not so particular about my food, you see, as most regular English people. Even at my father's table in London, we always had black olives, and caviare, and all sorts of queer Greek dishes—nasty sloppy messes our visitors called them, much like this *pillau*; but I was brought up on them, and I liked them.'

'And then you speak Arabic so well,' Owen went on enthusiastically. 'That's the Greek in you again, I suppose? Can you speak many languages? Most Eastern Europeans have such a natural taste for them.'

'Oh, yes, pretty well,' Ionê replied, with the careless air of a person who describes some unimportant accomplishment. 'English, and French, and German, of course; those come by nature—one hears everybody speaking them; and then modern Greek, papa's business friends always spoke that in the house, and we picked it up unconsciously; and ancient Greek—papa liked us to know enough, you see, to read the New Testament and follow the service at church. Papa was orthodox, of

course, and we went to Petersburg Place; and it was such fun to spell out Herodotus and Aristophanes and Æschylus. Men think you're clever; though, when you speak modern Greek fluently, you know, it isn't the least bit hard to pick out the sense of Thucydides and Plato; but I'm not learned, you must understand. I've only skimmed them through just as I'd skim Shakespeare or a French novel, or Dante's "Inferno."'

And she helped herself to some curds with her fingers daintily.

'Then you know Italian, too?' Owen interposed, still more open-mouthed.

'To read, not to talk—that is to say, not well. But I'd soon pick it up if I was a week in the country That's how I speak Arabic, as she is spoke, you know—no better. I took lessons for a fortnight at Oran before I started, from such a funny old Moor, with a French wife and three native ones; they boarded me in the harem, and we jib-jabbered together from morning to night, and I get along splendidly now. So would you, if you took the trouble, and if you've a turn for languages.'

'I have,' Owen answered modestly. 'I suppose that runs always with East European blood.' He paused and faltered, for in the midst of the *amine's* conversation, Mr. Hayward's keen eyes had darted a warning glance at him. Then he went on more quickly, as if to cover the slip: 'Your father's dead, I gather, from what you say. But have you a mother living?'

'Oh, dear, yes,' Ionê replied frankly, without a shade of false reserve. 'A dear old duck of a mother. She's Norse, my mother is, but Orthodox—Greek Church, I mean, you know. Papa married her at Bergen, when he was there in business, and she was received into the Church in London, after he was made a partner. That's why, though I'm practically English, I haven't a drop of English blood in my veins—thank Heaven! for I prefer to be original. I'm a cross between Nora Helmer and the Athenian of the age of Pericles, Sacha always tells me; and I'm proud of the mixture. Stay-at-home English people are so conventional; too Philistine, too

afraid to trust their own wings. I'm not like that. I'm wild on freedom.'

And she shook her straggling locks again, standing out wavily on all sides, and let her full white shirt purse itself out as it would over her uncorseted bosom.

'So I should think,' Owen answered, with a slight twinkle in his eye, though he admired her boldness immensely. 'But does your mother—' know you're out, he was half tempted to add, though he restrained himself with an effort, and finished the sentence—'approve of your coming away all alone by yourself like this to Morocco?'

Ionê drew in her rich red lips with expression, and wiped them internally—since the feast knew no napkins.

'I'm an individualist,' she said briskly; 'above everything, an individualist. I believe—it's a simple creed—in personal freedom, and I'm lucky in having a mother who's an individualist too, and who shares my confession of faith. When I was coming here, I said to her, "Well, I'm going to Morocco." "All right, dear," she said; "alone?" "Yes, alone, mother." "How 'll you travel, on foot?" "No, if possible, on horseback." "When do you start?" "To-morrow." "Very well, dear; take care of yourself." There's a mother for you, if you like. I think I've reason to be proud of her. I'm not conceited, I hope, but I flatter myself I've brought up my mother splendidly.'

Mr. Hayward, glancing sideways, would have given anything that moment to get rid of the *amine*. This conversation was terrible. It threatened instant ruin to all his best-laid plans. Was ever Owen confronted with such a dangerous pitfall? And he could do nothing—nothing to stop the full flow of this strange young woman's too attractive confidence.

He tried to draw her into conversation with the *amine*, but all to no purpose. Ionê was much more interestingly engaged elsewhere. She liked this young athlete with the great English limbs, who told her so modestly of his climbs among the mountains—a man after her own heart, and so handsome, too, and so appreciative. She rattled on with him by the hour, now narrating her own adven-

tures, now drawing out his. Long after the meal was removed, and the *amine* had withdrawn gracefully to his evening devotions (with a curse for the infidels), she kept those two there up talking continuously with her. Mr. Hayward himself, that heart of adamant, was hardly proof against her seductive charms. She was so frank, so adventurous, so bold, yet so innocent.

'You mustn't think ill of me,' she said at last, 'if I've talked like a woman all the evening—and all about myself. I've a right to be garrulous. I've such arrears to make up—such arrears; oh, dreadful! Just consider; it's five weeks to-day since I've met a Christian soul to talk to.'

Mr. Hayward stroked his chin and roped his big black moustache. The word Christian attracted him.

'And are you Orthodox, then, yourself,' he asked, 'like your father and mother?'

Ionê laughed at the question.

'Orthodox!' she cried merrily, with a girlish toss of her pretty head—it was a true Greek head, oval, straight-nosed, and round-faced—'not in any sense of the word. I'm a Christian, I hope, in essentials, if that's what you want to ask; but Orthodox, no, no! Not at all my line that. I'm just a concentrated bundle of all the heterodoxies.'

And with that final Parthian shot she nodded good-night to them both, and tripped gracefully away into the narrow doorway of the sleeping-room.

Before they retired for the night to roll themselves up in their own rugs on the smooth, mud-paved floor, Mr. Hayward whispered for a moment in a low voice to Owen.

'My boy,' he said, not angrily, but like one grieved and surprised, laying his hand on the young man's shoulder with that kindly paternal air of his, 'what a terrible slip about your East European blood! It took my breath away to hear you. How on earth did you ever come to do it?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' Owen answered, abashed and penitent. 'It slipped from me unawares. I suppose I was off my guard, being so far from England. Mr. Hayward, you're too good! Don't look at me like that, but do scold me—do scold me for it. I'd give worlds if you'd

scold me sometimes instead of taking things to heart so. Oh, how wrong of me—how silly! What can I do to show you how grieved and ashamed I am? . . . Dear friend, dear guardian, don't look at me like that. This time will be a warning to me. As long as I live, I promise you faithfully, I'll never do so again—never, never, never!'

And to do him justice, he kept his word faithfully.

CHAPTER VII.

A PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDY.

Owen slept that evening much worse than usual. Not that the externals of his resting-place at Ain-Essa differed in any essential particular from those of the other squalid native huts where he'd spent every previous night since leaving Tangier. The dogs didn't bark louder, the jackals didn't whine in a more melancholy monotone, the fleas didn't bite with any livelier persistence, than in all the other sparse Berber villages on the slopes of Atlas. But Owen slept a great deal less than his wont, for all that; and the reason was—he was thinking of Ionê.

She was separated from him only by a thin wooden partition; for these native North African guest-houses are far from luxurious. Indeed, it is the fashion to make a single building serve the double purpose of an inn and of the village cow-house. At one end of the guest-chamber rises a broad wooden platform, under which the mules and cattle are stabled, their heads projecting through an opening into the room one sleeps in. But to this arrangement, which carried his mind away at first to the inn at Bethlehem, Owen had by this time grown perfectly accustomed; what he hadn't grown accustomed to was Ionê's close proximity. For the room was divided transversely by a thin layer of pine planks; and through the chinks of the boards, as well as through the open space at the far end where the cattle were tethered, he could hear Ionê's deep breath, long and regular like a

child's, rise and fall with each movement of that invisible bosom.

He thought much of Ionê, therefore, and of the chance that had thrown them thus strangely together.

She'd come there for amusement, she said; for amusement alone, and perhaps, when she got back, to write a book about it. If he'd read that book in London, it would have been nothing, nothing. But meeting Ionê out there, in the flesh, among the wild hills of Morocco, in her masculine attire and with her free English spirit—for, after all, it *was* English—she seemed to him more like some creature from the realms of fairyland: some Hellenic nymph, Oread or Dryad revived, in this alien world of woman-enslaving Islam.

Not that Ionê seemed to think much of her own exploit herself. It was that that put the finishing touch to her singular character. She talked as though it were quite a matter of course for a girl of nineteen to be travelling alone in man's clothes through the mountains of North Africa. A mere detail of convenience on an out-of-the-way route. An accident of caprice. Owen admired her all the more for it.

But she must have money, too. That was bad. Or else how could she come such trips as this by herself? Owen didn't dream of marriage yet—he was only just turned twenty—but he had a prejudice against money, especially in a woman. Most wholesome-minded men would prefer to work for the girl of their choice themselves, and let her owe everything to them, rather than put up with a wife who could keep them or help them, and make them lose their sense of perfect independence.

At last he dozed off. Even so he slept but lightly. He was aware of the bite of each individual flea in all that populous room, and heard in his dreams the various droning notes of each responsive jackal.

Earlier than usual next morning Mr. Hayward waked him up with a gentle touch on his shoulder.

'Lève-toi,' he said in French, which they talked together oftener than not, for practice' sake, on these holiday outings—thorough colloquial French is so useful for young men in the diplomatic service. 'We must get

under way pretty early this morning or we shall sleep à la belle étoile. I'm thinking of a long stage. Dress quick, and come out to me.'

He didn't say why; but Owen fancied he knew, for all that. Mr. Hayward was anxious to get well started on the road before Ionê was up, and in the opposite direction from the one she meant to go in.

In that hope, however, the wise guardian of youth was unexpectedly frustrated; for scarcely had they gone out into the cool courtyard from the stuffy room where they'd passed the night in their rugs amid the hot breath of the cattle, when a lively voice broke in upon them:

'Good-morning, friends; good-morning. Isn't it just stifling in there! I'm out half an hour before you.'

It was Ionê, sure enough, up and dressed betimes, in fez and white shirt, even prettier in the fresh morning air than last night after her journey. Did she always rise so early? Owen wondered to himself; or had she got up on purpose—he hardly dared to ask it of his own soul, for he had the modesty of a man—well, on purpose to say good-bye to them?

Ionê, however, didn't leave them long in doubt.

'Oh, Mr. Hayward,' she said, after a few minutes, in the most natural way possible, 'I wanted to see you before I went, just to ask you a favour. I wonder, now, if you'd photograph me? You said last night you'd a lens and all that sort of thing here with you, and I thought, if you didn't mind, it 'd be so nice to be "took," as the servants say, in all my *chiffons* like this, got up in costume as a regular Barbary barbarian. Of course, I *could* have it done, you know, just as well in London; only, it *wouldn't* be "just as well," but quite different altogether. If I went for it to Elliot and Fry's, or to Mortimer's in Bond Street, it 'd be a cut-and-dried London cabinet portrait of a lady in a fancy dress—nothing more than that—no surroundings, no reality. But if I got it taken here, with the real live Atlas in the distance for a background, and the village and the Berbers for accessories on either side—well, suppose I should ever happen to make a book of all this, just think what a lovely idea for a frontispiece.'

Mr. Hayward laughed and humoured her. No harm in humouring—just for once—a pretty girl one'll most likely never see again as long as one lives.

'I *am* Mortimer's in Bond Street,' he said, with a quiet smile. 'In private life I'm known as Lambert Hayward; but in business I'm Mortimer and Co., and I live by taking photographs. However, if you like, after breakfast, we'll try, though I don't know whether these Berbers will care very much to let us get a shot at their villages.'

'Oh, leave that to *me*,' Ionê said confidently. 'I'll soon make it all right. I'll get round the *amine*. He's a dear old gentleman, I can see, and he'll do anything one asks him—if only one goes the right way to work about it.'

And as she said it, she looked so bewitchingly arch and charming, that Mr. Hayward in his heart agreed with her altogether. Before such guileless art, even ripe men, he felt with a pang, are but as clay in the hands of the potter.

So after breakfast he got out his camera, obedient to her wish, with less concealment than was his wont, and proceeded to make preparations for photographing Ionê. The pretty cosmopolitan herself, meanwhile, poured out voluble explanations in very womanly Arabic to the village chief, at each sentence of which the old Moslem stroked his own short beard caressingly, and called Allah to witness in strange gutturals that he meant no harm, and gazed hard at the pleading girl, and reflected to himself with a very puzzled head that the ways of Allah and these infidels are truly wonderful. Strange that such fair women should be wasted on unbelievers. But at the end of it all he raised his head and crossed his hands on his breast.

'Allah is great,' he murmured piously. 'You have eyes like the gazelle. Do as you will, oh lady.'

'We'll have it here, then, Mr. Hayward,' Ionê said, motioning him over towards the little domed tomb of a Mohammedan saint, surrounded by prickly pears and great spike-leaved aloes. 'This makes such a pretty background. It's Africa all over, and those children

there must come across and be examining my locket. 'This way, little ones,' in Arabic. 'Now, just so, then, Mr. Hayward.'

The operator hesitated.

'I hardly know if it's quite safe,' he said, glancing quickly to either side. 'This tomb is a *koubba*, you see —the shrine of some petty saint, almost as holy as a mosque, and exceedingly sacred. The people may be angry with us if I try to make a picture of it.'

Ionê beamed inquiry with those bright eyes at the *amine*. The *amine*, overpowered, nodded ungrudging assent. For those bright eyes, indeed, what live man would not forego all the houris in Paradise?

'Allah is great,' he muttered once more, 'and the tomb is a holy one. It will save the picture from sin. The bones of the blessed Sidi Ahmed Ben Moussa within it might sanctify anything.'

'Which is one way of looking at it. Desecration and v revenge by sudden murder is the other one.

..all I stand in line, too, just to balance the group?' Owen suggested, half trembling.

Mr. Hayward, at the camera, raised one warning hand in solemn deprecation.

'No, no,' he said quickly. 'That would never, never do. Your European get-up would break in upon the unity of the scene, Owen. Fetch Miss Dracopoli's Algerian—I beg your pardon—Ionê's, I mean. His dress is so distinctive. He'll be much more appropriate.'

'Won't this man here do still better?' Owen asked, raising his hand to point at a handsome young native who lounged by the arched door of a neighbouring hut, in the picturesque upland garb of the country, one long cloak folded toga-wise.

But Ionê dashed down his arm almost faster than he raised it.

'Don't do that!' she cried, half alarmed. 'Haven't you learnt that yet? You've no idea what an insult it is. He might rush at you and stab you for it. In Morocco you should never venture to point at anybody. They think it brings down upon them the evil-eye. My

old Moor at Oran told me that, and lots of other good tips like it. They're a ticklish people to deal with, these Berbers, and you've got to humour them. Pointing's almost as bad as asking the father of a household after his wives and family. You should ignore his womankind. They're his own concern here you see, and nobody else's. What a country to live in! It wouldn't suit me. I'm awfully glad, after all, I was born in some ways an Englishwoman.'

The pose was quickly completed, and the picture taken. As soon as it was finished, Mr. Hayward went off for a minute to pack the negative with the rest, leaving Owen and Ionê alone by the dome-covered tomb for a short breathing-space.

The moment he was gone, Ionê gazed at the young man, and murmured in a ruminative voice:

'So he's Mortimer and Co., in business. How curious! How singular!'

'Yes, Mortimer and Co., in Bond Street,' Owen answered, somewhat alarmed at the turn her thoughts were taking.

'And out of it he calls himself Lambert Hayward, does he?'

'He does. Lambert Hayward.'

'But what's his *real* name?' Ionê burst out, turning round with a sudden dart, and flashing the question on him unexpectedly.

Owen was quite taken aback at her lightning-like quickness.

'His *real* name,' he repeated, all disconcerted. 'Why, I told you—Lambert Hayward.'

'Oh, bosh!' Ionê answered promptly, with the saucy confidence of a pretty girl. 'You don't really expect me to swallow *that* now, do you?'

'Why not?' Owen asked, flushing hot.

'Why not?' Ionê echoed, brimming over with conscious discovery. 'Well, that's really too absurd of you. Why not Lambert Hayward? Simply because Lambert Hayward's a pure English name, and your friend's no more English than I am; nor half as much either, if it comes to that. He wasn't even born in England.'

'You think not?' Owen answered uneasily, appalled at the girl's hasty intuition.

'Oh dear no!' Ionê cried with decision, shaking her pretty fluffy hair. 'I knew that at a glance. I knew it by his *r*'s, and his *o*, *w*'s, and his *s*, *h*'s. He's not English at all, I'm sure; the man's a Russian.'

There was a deep, long pause. Owen could hear his own heart beat. He wouldn't tell a lie, and the truth would undo him. He let his eyes rest nervously on the ground some seconds; he didn't dare to raise them lest his witch should read every thought in his reeling brain.

'He *calls* himself an Englishman,' he murmured at last, 'and says he was born in England;' and for one instant he looked at her.

Their eyes met in a flash. Ionê's peered deep into his; Owen quailed before her keen scrutiny. Then the girl added calmly:

'Yes, but it isn't *true*, you know, and you yourself know it isn't. He's as Russian as he can be—as Russian as they make them. His native tongue's Russki. I've half a mind to try him with a sentence or two in good Russ, just to see how it confuses him.

Owen stared at her in mute agony. Oh, what on earth was he to do? He clasped his hands and grew cold; he felt like a criminal.

'For Heaven's sake *don't!*' he cried, all aghast. 'If you do, what can he think, except that I've betrayed him, and I'd sooner die than that? If you speak a word to him in Russian, I'll jump over the nearest crag and kill myself.'

He spoke with awful seriousness. Ionê took it in at a glance; she saw how alarmed he was, and nodded a quiet acquiescence.

'Don't be afraid,' she said shortly; 'I'm as dark as night, and as close as the grave. I won't whisper a word to him. Besides, to tell you the truth, I don't know any Russ. I said it for a joke. But you see I was right. You admit it yourself now. I was just sure he was a Russian.'

At that moment, as she spoke, Mr. Hayward stalked unconcernedly out of the guest-house in the rear.

'Daughter of all the Dracopolis,' he said gaily, for he

was too polite to go on calling her Ionê outright, even at her own request, 'it's succeeded very well, and is a capital photograph. To what address in London may I send you the positives?'

But even as he said it he saw what a mistake he had made. For it was giving Owen the clue to the pretty Greek's address—though, after all, if one came to think, he could have got it if he was so minded, from Sacha, any day.

CHAPTER VIII.

DANGER AHEAD.

As soon as the photograph was finished, Ionê prepared to go her own way and continue her journey. Ali brought round her horse, ready saddled, and Ionê, now fully dressed in her embroidered jacket and fez, sprang lightly on its back with an easy vault, man-fashion.

'Well, it's been pleasant to meet a European face again, and hear a word or two of English,' she said, turning towards them with a sunny smile on those full rich lips. 'I don't deny that, though I came here to escape them. It's good of you to have troubled about my photograph, too. Thank you ever so much for it. And now good-bye. We may meet again some day, I've no doubt, in London.'

'All fortuitous atoms clash at the centre at last,' Mr. Hayward answered, in his sententious way, raising his hat and holding his head bare with the same stately courtesy as ever till she was well out of sight. 'What's your next stage to-day? Where do you go from here?'

Ionê looked to the strapping of the little bag behind her saddle as she answered gaily:

'Taourist, Taourist; a very fanatical and turbulent village, our host here tells me; no photographing mosques there. They shoot you for amusement. And you, Mr. Hayward? You'll be sleeping at——'

'Ouarzin,' Mr. Hayward answered, still bareheaded by the gateway.

'Good!' Ionê replied, with that expansive smile of hers—too expansive, Owen thought to himself, for it included all humanity.

And then she waved them a friendly adieu with her plump ungloved hand, and rode off like a sunbeam, rejoicing in her strength and youth and beauty.

As she rounded the corner out of sight, Mr. Hayward turned and gave the order to their own servant to start immediately. Half an hour later they were threading once more, single file, the narrow bridle-paths on the volcanic hillside.

The village of Ain-Essa, from which they had just come, like most other in the Berber uplands of the Atlas, crowned the summit of a small knoll; and all roads to all parts converged and diverged at a spot a few hundred yards on the slope below it. When they had reached this Clapham Junction of the local highway system, Mr. Hayward halted a moment in doubt, and pointed ahead inquiringly to one out of the three main routes that branched off in various directions.

'Where does it go?' he asked their servant in Arabic.

And the man, bending his head, made answer 'Taourist.'

Owen's quick ear, accustomed to rapid assimilation of foreign languages, caught the strange sounds at once, and even interpreted the question aright, for he was beginning by this time to pick up a few stray words of Arabic. Taourist! That was where Ionê had said she was going! But they were not to follow her. Mr. Hayward looked away quickly, and turned to the second one.

'And this?' he asked, pointing to the west with his riding-whip.

'Effendi, to Ouarzin.'

Mr. Hayward shook his head again. That surprised Owen not a little. For Ouarzin was the village they had mapped out to take next in due course on their route, and only that very morning, too, Mr. Hayward had told Ionê he meant to go there. Now, Mr. Hayward, he knew, was by no means a man to turn lightly aside from any resolve once made, however unimportant.

'The third one?' he asked once more, with demonstrative crop.

The Arab attendant shrugged his shoulders uneasily.

'Ah, Effendi,' he said, 'a bad road—a very bad road indeed—and a wild set of villagers. It was up there a Spaniard—a very rich man—was killed by the dervishes last year out of hatred of the infidel. I don't advise you to try there. It's called Beni-Mengella.'

In spite of this adjuration, however, Mr. Hayward loosened his rein, and took the last-named path without a word of explanation. Owen followed in silence. The Arab servant for his part was too respectful or too overawed to venture on questioning him.

They rode on for some minutes along the steep and narrow mule-track, a mere ledge on the hillside, mounting up and ever up, beset with endless loose stones, and overhung by ragged thickets of prickly cactus. It was a beautiful scene. To the left rose the mountains, densely wooded to the top with rich and luxuriant Southern vegetation; to the right yawned the ravine, leading down into a deep valley, tilled in patches with scanty corn or waving gray with silvery olive groves. White villages perched here and there on buttressed spurs of the mountain-tops, petty mosques or domed tombs and whited sepulchres of dead saints, served to diversify the principal heights with appropriate local landmarks. Below lay tangled gorges of the mountain streams, pink with flowering oleanders or draped by rich festoons of creamy African clematis. Now and then, near the villages, they just spied for a second some group of laughing girls, their faces unveiled, bearing pitchers on their heads, and passing to and fro with loud cries and merry chatter from the fountain. Mr. Hayward would have given much to get a snap-shot at such a group; but, unfortunately, the Berber women were as timid as fawns, and, seeing them, fled scared behind the shelter of the trees, or peeped out at them as they passed from behind some darkling doorway with the mingled curiosity and fear of a pack of shy children.

After half an hour or more of this silent ride, Owen broke in suddenly at last:

'I thought, Mr. Hayward, you meant to go to Ouarzin.

'So I did,' his friend answered, without looking back or slackening rein, 'but at the very last moment I changed my mind. Modifiability of opinion, you know, Owen, as Herbert Spencer says, is a fair rough test of the highest intelligence.'

When Mr. Hayward talked like that Owen was always overawed. Irrepressible, cheery English schoolboy that he was at heart, those short sentences of Mr. Hayward's shut him up completely.

As he answered nothing of himself, his friend added, after a pause:

'I wouldn't go to Taourist, because Miss Dracopoli said she was going there; and I wouldn't go to Ouarzin, because I'd told Miss Dracopoli we should spend the night there ourselves, and I thought—well, I thought perhaps she might elect to change her mind, and go on there, after all, on purpose to meet us. So now, you see, Owen, I'm always frank with you. I've told you the whole truth. You can guess the rest for yourself. Some men in my place would have concealed it from you sedulously. That's not my way, my boy. I tell you the simple truth, and I tell it outright. . . . To put it plainly, I don't think it's well for you to see too much of young women of Miss Dracopoli's temperament.'

And Mr. Hayward was quite right. He was acting, as usual, with all the wisdom of the serpent and all the innocence of the dove. By thus saying straight out his inmost mind to Owen, he was putting Owen on his honour, as it were, and compelling acquiescence. For Owen was Englishman enough to feel such generous treatment bound him down in turn to the intensest integrity. If Mr. Hayward didn't wish him to see more of Ionê, how in goodness' name could he ever do enough to avoid her in future?'

Not that he was so very anxious to meet their new friend again; though she took his fancy immensely at first sight. Her freedom, her courage, her frankness, her innocence, all hit him hard on the tenderest points, and he knew it already. But it was the principle, above

all things, that troubled him sorely. Did Mr. Hayward mean to put him thus on his honour, he wondered, as to Ionê in particular, or to all women in general? If the last, that was surely a very large order. Owen was just growing to the age when a pretty girl exercises a distinct magnetic influence on a young man's soul. Did Mr. Hayward intend that all that side of human nature should be a blank page to him? Was he to lead an anchorite's life? Did the cause demand even that painful sacrifice of him?

After a few minutes' pause he spoke.

'Miss Dracopoli in particular?' he asked, pursuing his own train of thought, as if Mr. Hayward had been following it all the time, as indeed was the case, 'or all women in general?'

Mr. Hayward turned and gazed at him—a mute, imploring gaze.

'My boy,' he said kindly, but with a sort of terror in his eye, 'sooner or later I felt this subject must be discussed between us, and to-day's as good an occasion for discussing it as any. On this point, Owen, I feel exactly like Paul—I have no commandment from the Lord about it, but I give you my judgment: "I would have you without carefulness." I would have your hands kept free, if possible, to do the work that's set before you. Remember, love affairs are a very great snare; they take up a young man's time and distract his attention. That's why I've kept single to this day myself. There are women I might have loved, but I've cherished my celibacy. It allowed me to direct my undivided energies to the good of the cause. "He that is unmarried," says Paul, "careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife." There you have the question in a nutshell. And so, like the Apostle, I lay no command upon you. I'm too wise for that. If you *must* fall in love, you *must*, and no care or resolution will keep you out of it. But, at any rate, you needn't rush into the way of it needlessly. Keep your head clear if you can, and let the cause have the heart of you.'

And for the rest of that ride Mr. Hayward talked on with unwonted freedom and vigour of the cause. He talked much, too, of his plans for Owen's future life, and of how the cause was to be benefited by his going into the diplomatic service.

'But even if I get an *attaché's* place,' Owen said at last, with a glance as he passed at a green ravine below them, 'how can you ever ensure my getting sent to Petersburg?' He always spoke of it so, and not as St. Petersburg. It's the Russian way, and he had picked up the habit from Mr. Hayward.

The elder man smiled a calm, serene smile of superior wisdom.

'My dear boy,' he said, looking back at him, 'you needn't trouble about that. Do you think I've laid my schemes in such a haphazard way as your question implies?—I, Lambert Hayward? You don't know me yet, Owen. But *you* have no need to muddle your head about such trifles. Your place is to go wherever you may be sent, and to wait till the signal for action is given you. Till then you can leave all with perfect safety to me. When the signal comes you must strike, and strike home; and as long as this world lasts a grateful country will remember you.'

'I see,' Owen answered, almost blushing for his indiscretion in asking. 'I might have guessed it, I know. You do nothing carelessly, and I understand how many strings you hold in your hand at once; how intricate to pull, how difficult to co-ordinate. I realize how you're in touch with every chord and pulse of this vast organization the whole world over. Don't think, Mr. Hayward, I undervalue the privilege of being so trusted by you, and of living so near you. Don't think I doubt for a moment your power to arrange this, or almost anything else you seriously set your mind upon. Only, I wondered, even with all your influence, how you could so far pull the wires of the Foreign Office in England as to get a particular *attaché* sent to Petersburg or to Vienna.'

The smile on Mr. Hayward's lips grew deeper and wiser than ever. He turned his head once more, and answered in the same masterful tone as before:

'Owen, you take far too much for granted. You think you fathom me, my boy; you think you fathom me. Many men and women have tried to do that in their time, but not one of them has succeeded. . . . Why, who told you I ever meant you to go to Petersburg at all? Pure inference of your own, pure human inference; *I* never said so.' He paused a moment and reflected. Then he went on again more confidentially. 'See here,' he said, dropping his voice by pure habit even in those unpeopled wilds. 'It's not in Russia itself that we stand the best chance of striking a decisive blow at this hateful autocracy. Quite the contrary; nowhere else in the world are our opportunities so small, or the defence so active. There we're watched, numbered, thwarted, conspired against, counter-plotted; there we're held in check by endless spies and police and soldiers; there the men and women of the Romanoff horde are guided night and day by innumerable precautions. In Russia itself, I doubt whether even an English *attaché* could ever get near enough the person of the chief criminal or his leading accomplices to effect anything practical. He might, of course, or he mightn't. But that isn't the plan I have in view for you, Owen. I mean to let them send you wherever they like. And wherever you go, you'll be equally useful to us.'

'More perhaps elsewhere than at Petersburg itself,' Owen suggested, as calmly as if it were the merest ordinary business. He had been brought up to regard it so, and it was so that he regarded it.

'More perhaps elsewhere,' Mr. Hayward assented with a nod. 'Much more perhaps elsewhere. At Petersburg you might pick up for us some useful information, and being an Englishman and a member of the Embassy, you'd be the less suspected of having anything to do with us. But elsewhere you could manage far more than that. You might have access to the Romanoffs themselves, whenever one of them came by. There's nowhere they mayn't come—they pervade all Europe—Copenhagen, Athens, Nice, Florence, Brussels—and even the jealous care of the most friendly police can't exclude from their circle members of the diplomatic body. Why, they're not

even safe in Asia itself; we dogged them through India. One of them was wounded the other day in Japan; another was attacked, though all that was hushed up, at the Taj at Agra. Therein lies our strength, my boy; we're ubiquitous and irrepressible. The criminals never know from what unexpected point, at what unexpected moment, the ministers of justice may overtake them and pounce down upon them. And what would terrify them more than the sudden discovery some day, in the midst of the festivities of some foreign court, that a minister of justice stood unnoticed even there, in the guise of an envoy of some friendly potentate? We want to make it impossible for any man, however brave, to accept the bad eminence of autocrat and gaoler-in-chief of all the Russias. Can you imagine any plan more likely to accomplish our end than this plan of striking a blow where it's least expected by the hand of one who had always passed for a neutral Englishman, and whose very connection with the Cause or the People in Russia no one but ourselves would ever so much as dream of suspecting?'

Owen glanced ahead at him admiringly.

'Mr. Hayward,' he said with profound conviction, 'you're a wonderful man. If anyone can free Russia, you surely will do it! It makes me proud to have sat at such a patriot's feet. Forgive me if I've asked you too much to-day. I'm only the very least of your subordinates, I know, and I never want to worm out more than the commander-in-chief himself willingly tells me.'

Mr. Hayward gave him a look of true paternal kindliness.

'Right, my boy,' he said warmly. 'You're always right. I never had anyone I could trust and be trusted by like you, from the very beginning. That gives me much hope. Though things look black ahead now.'

And then, in a voice full of fiery indignation, he gave way all at once in a very rare outburst, and began to recount in rapid words a whole string of terrible atrocities in Siberia and elsewhere, detailed to him in cipher by his last budget from St. Petersburg.

Owen listened, and felt his blood boil within him. Not for nothing had Mr. Hayward trained up in the faith his Nihilist neophyte.

CHAPTER IX.

FAMILY BUSINESS.

In Morocco, these things. Away over in St. Petersburg, that self-same day, a lady was closeted close in a bureau of the Third Section with that stern military policeman, General Alexis Selistoff.

'And so you've obtained some influence with him, you think, Madame Mireff?' the General said, musing and twirling his bronzed thumbs.

'Influence?' Madame Mireff repeated, with a bland feminine smile. 'I can just twist him round my fingers —so,' and she suited the action to the word. 'As a statesman, of course, Lord Caistor's unapproachable and irreproachable—we all know that; but as a man—well, he's human. I take him on the human side—and I do what I like with him.'

The General smiled responsive—a grim smile and sardonic.

'Politics,' he murmured in a very soft voice, like a woman's for gentleness—though, to be sure, it was he who flogged a Polish lady to death once at Warsaw for some trifling act of insubordination to the Government orders —'politics have a morality all of their own.'

Madame Mireff assented with a graceful nod.

'Though you mustn't for a moment suppose,' she said, hesitating, 'that our *personal* relations——'

The General was a gentleman. (In Russia that quality is by no means incompatible with flogging women to death when the morality peculiar to politics sanctions or even demands such an extreme act of discipline). He cut her short at once with a polite wave of the hand.

'My dear Madame Mireff,' he said, in his most deprecating tone, 'I hope you don't think I could for one second imagine that a lady of your character——'

One outstretched palm and a half-averted face completed the sentence.

'Of course you understand me,' Madame Mireff went on, blushing a trifle even so. 'We are friends, he and I

—that's all. The Earl is an able man and a keen politician; but in private life he's a most charming person. We get on together admirably. *Figurez vous* that I go down to stop now and then with dear Lady Caistor at Sherringham-on-Sea; and there I have the Earl to myself half the day in the garden or the drawing-room. . . . We never talk politics, General, you must understand. *Pas si bête*, I need hardly tell you. I influence him gently; the dropping of water on a stone; a constant imperceptible side-pressure, if I may say so. Russia in the abstract; a Russian woman in the concrete; that's all I have to play against his astuteness and his suspicion. Our sincerity, our devotion, our simple, natural straightforwardness, our enthusiasm for humanity—those are the chief chords of my four-stringed lute. I harp on it always, though not, I hope, monotonously. It tells upon him in the end. You can see it telling upon him. He says to himself: "The character of the units determines the character of the aggregate. A nation made up of units like this must be on the whole a tolerably decent one." And it influences his policy. You must notice for yourself he's less distrustful of us than formerly.'

The General leaned back in his round office chair, neatly padded in brown leather, stamped with the imperial arms, and surveyed her critically.

No wonder a statesman who accepted Madame Mireff as the typical Russian should think well of the country whose tangible embodiment and representative she proclaimed herself. For a handsomer ripe woman of forty-five you wouldn't wish to see anywhere than Olga Mireff. Her figure was full and round, yet not too full or too round for the most fastidious taste; her charms were mature, yet all the richer for their maturity. An intelligent, earnest, enthusiastic face, great child-like eyes, a sweet and generous smile, rare beauty of feature, rare naïveté of expression—all these went to the making up of a most engaging personality. Her hands were plump but soft and white and dimpled. Her motions were slow, but they quickened with animation, and grew positively mercurial under the influence of enthusiasm.

The very woman, General Selistoff thought to himself, to twist round her fingers, as she said, a clever and impressionable Foreign Secretary like Lord Caistor. Alexis Selistoff had never had a better made instrument to work with. This little wedge of feminine insinuation might enable him in time to permeate the whole inert mass of English opinion.

The General paused, and fingered his waxed moustache.

'And you go back again to-morrow?' he said, still surveying her with approbation.

Madame Mireff nodded assent.

'Unless you wish it otherwise,' she answered; 'I am yours to command. But if you see no objection—then to London to-morrow.'

The man of politics shrugged his shoulders. They were broad and well set.

'Oh, as for my wishes, *chère dame*,' he said, with an air of official disclaimer, 'you know very well *they* have nothing at all to do with the matter. You are not, and never were, an agent of the Government. If you drop in here for a chat with me, in a moment of leisure, you drop in as a friend—nothing more, *bien entendu*. Some little relaxation, some little interlude of the charms of female society, may surely be allowed us in a life so monotonous and so deadly dull as this eternal routine of ours. I sign my own name on an average three hundred and seventy-four times per diem. But as to business, business, you have nothing to do with *that*. *La haute politique* is not a lady's affair. Tape, dockets, files, pigeon-holes, those are administration, if you will; but a visit to England by an unauthorized Russian lady'—he gazed at her hard—'mere private gadding. Disabuse your mind as to that, Madame, disabuse your mind as to that, though I know you don't even need to be told to disabuse yourself.'

Madame Mireff's smile as he spoke those words was a study in complexity. It contained in itself four or five smiles superposed, in distinct strata, and one of them, perhaps, would have surprised General Selistoff not a little, had he known its full import. But Madame

didn't enlighten him on that abstruse point. She only answered submissively:

'I'm well aware of those facts, General. My one object in life is to serve my country and my Czar, unobtrusively and unofficially, by such simple private influence as a mere woman can exert in a foreign capital.'

Though Madame knew very well in her own heart that a Russian lady would never be permitted to exercise influence on English politics, directly or indirectly, in whatever capacity, unless it suited the Government she should unofficially represent it. And so, too, did General Selistoff. Had it been otherwise, no passport at the very least—perhaps even imprisonment, the mines, Siberia.

They looked at one another and smiled again, with their tongues in their cheeks, mentally speaking, like the Roman augurs when they met in private. Then the General spoke again:

'And Prince Ruric Brassoff?' he said, with an ugly frown on his high bronzed forehead; 'still no trace of him anywhere? You haven't one hope of a clue? How that man eludes us!'

'No,' Madame Mireff answered demurely, laying one plump hand with resignation over the other, and shaking a solemn head. 'He eludes us still. How can you hope to catch him? I feel convinced even his own associates don't know where he is. I've made every inquiry. The man works like a mole underground, popping up here and there for a moment to take breath, as it were, or not even that. He's invisible and incalculable. Nobody ever sees him, nobody ever talks with him; only written messages flutter down now and again from the sky, or from unknown sources, bearing an Egyptian postmark, it may be, or a Maltese, or a Norwegian, or a Sicilian. They're not even in his own hand, they say—not the bulk of the document. Only the signature's his; the rest's type-written, or copied by an amanuensis, or dictated, or in cipher. His subordinates have nothing to go upon but those two mysterious words, "Ruric Brassoff," at the bottom of an order. But they obey it as implicitly as if it fell upon them from heaven. Most of them have

never set eyes upon the man himself in their lives at all; nobody on earth has set eyes upon him for ten years past; yet there he is still, wrapped in the clouds as it were, but pulling all the strings just as clearly as ever. It's a most mysterious case. Though, after all, as a diplomat, one can hardly help admiring him.'

General Selistoff looked up sharply at her in a surprised sort of way, Born bureaucrat that he was, he couldn't understand how anyone could admire even the cleverest and most audacious of rebels.

'Well, that's a matter of opinion,' he said slowly, pressing his thumb very tight on the edge of his desk. 'For my part, if I'd Ruric Brassoff's neck under here this minute——' The thumb was raised for one second and then squeezed down again significantly. General Selistoff paused once more. His eyes looked away into the abysses of space. 'Ruric Brassoff,' he repeated slowly, 'Ruric Brassoff, Ruric Brassoff. If only we could catch that one single man, we wouldn't take long to crush out the whole infernal conspiracy.'

'You think so?' Madame inquired, looking up.

'He's its head,' the bureaucrat answered impatiently. 'No organization on earth can possibly go on when it's head's cut off.'

And he had had experience, too, in the results of decapitation.

'We got on somehow after our late beloved Czar was murdered by these wretches,' Madame put in, very gravely.

The General sat up stiff. He didn't like this turn. 'Twas beneath him to bandy words and arguments with a woman.

'Well, you'll not relax your efforts, at any rate,' he said, more coldly, 'to get some clue to Prince Ruric Brassoff's whereabouts. Remember, five hundred thousand roubles and the title of Princess. Ceaseless vigilance is our only resource. Leave no stone unturned. Under one or other of them, we know, must lurk the scorpion that bit us.'

'True,' Madame answered, relapsing into pure submissiveness, for she saw it was wisest.

'And there's one other point I want to suggest to you,' the General went on, somewhat mollified. 'A very painful point; but I must bring myself to speak of it. I've often thought of mentioning it to you, dear Madame, before, and when it came to the point I've always been naturally reluctant.' He dropped his voice suddenly. 'You'll understand why,' he went on, 'when I tell you it relates to my unhappy and misguided brother, Sergius Selistoff.'

Madame Miroff bowed her head with a sympathetic inclination. She let a rhetorical pause of some seconds elapse before she answered the General, whose own eyes fell abashed, as is natural when one mentions some disgraceful episode in one's family history. Then she murmured in a lower key:

'I understand perfectly. I never expected to hear that name mentioned in this room again, and unless you had brought it up yourself, you can readily believe, Excellency, I wouldn't have dared to allude to it.'

'No, no,' the General continued, forcing himself to speak with difficulty. 'But I'm anxious to find out something about his family and affairs, and you're the only person on earth, dear Madame, to whose hands I could endure to confide the inquiry. To no one else but yourself could I bring myself to speak about it. Sergius had a boy, you know—in fact, two children, a boy and a girl. Before he was sent to Siberia, after his treachery become known,' and the old bureaucrat spoke like one weighed down with shame, 'those children were spirited away somehow out of the country. You know their history, I suppose. You know the circumstances of that unfortunate marriage.'

'Not in full,' Madame answered, all respectful sympathy. 'And when one's engaged on a matter of the kind it's best, of course, to know all. I've only heard that Sergius Selistoff married an English woman.'

The General bowed his head once more.

'Yes, an English woman,' he answered. 'But that's not all. A public singer at Vienna, who, as we have reason to believe, for her family's sake sang under an assumed name, and whose relations in England we've

never been able to trace since Sergius—— went to the fate reserved for traitors. On the morning when the administrative order was issued from this office for my brother's arrest—I signed it myself—Madame Selistoff and the children disappeared from Petersburg as if by magic. My sister-in-law, as you must have heard, was discovered, raving mad, a few weeks later, in the streets of Wilna, though how or why she got there nobody even knew, and from that day till her death, some seven months afterwards, she did nothing but cry that her children at least must be saved; her children at least must get away safe from that awful place to England.'

The old man stroked his moustache.

'It was terrible,' he said slowly — 'terrible what suffering Sergius brought upon us all, and on that unhappy woman.'

'It was terrible indeed,' Madame Mireff answered, with a look of genuine horror.

'Well, what I want just now,' the General continued, rising up in all the height of his great Russian figure, and going to a little cupboard, from which he brought forth a small bundle of brown and dusty papers—'what I want just now is that you should find out for me in England whether those children are there still, and in whose keeping.'

'Perfectly,' Madame answered. 'You wish, perhaps, to be of service to the boy—to bring your brother's son back to Russia again, give him the rank of a Selistoff, and make him a loyal subject of our beloved Emperor.'

The old man brought his fist down on his desk with a resounding blow.

'No, no!' he cried fiercely, his face lighting up with indignation. 'Ten thousand times no; I renounce Sergius Selistoff and all his works for ever. . . . The boy's no nephew of mine—no true-born Selistoff—an English half-breed by a rebel father. I'd send him to the mines, as I sent my brother before him, if only I could catch him. As Sergius died, so his son should die in turn. . . . A Selistoff, did you say? Our blood disowns the whole brood of the traitor.'

'I see,' Madame answered, with true Russian im-

passiveness. Not a muscle of her face moved. Not a quiver passed over her. Only the long, black lashes drooped above the great childlike eyes. 'And you want me to find out where they're living now? Well, if anybody in England can track them, I can promise it will be I. Names, ages, and descriptions—I see you have them there all pat in your *dossier*.'

The General undid the bundle with an unwonted trembling in those iron fingers. Then he stretched out the papers before Madame Mireff's keen eyes.

'Alexandra, aged four at the time of her flight, would now be twenty-five, or thereabouts,' he said, quivering. 'Sergius, a baby in arms, would be between twenty and twenty-one. Here, you see, are their descriptions and such details as we could recover of the mother's family. But it was a *mésalliance*, you must understand, for a Russian nobleman—a complete *mésalliance*. She gave her name at the ceremony as Aurora Montmorency, but we believe it to have been false, and we don't know the real one. *Your* business will be only to hunt up these people; *mine*, to crush them, when found, as one would crush beneath one's heel a brood of young vipers.'

'Perfectly,' Madame answered, with a charming smile. 'I understand my mission, Excellency. I will obey your instructions.'

CHAPTER X

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

And while in St. Petersburg, General Selistoff was uttering those words to his trusted associate, on the mountain path near Beni-Mengella, in Morocco, Mr. Hayward was exclaiming enthusiastically to Owen Cazalet: 'It's a glorious work, my boy, and it's laid upon you in due course by your glorious inheritance.'

'And yet,' Owen murmured, musing, 'it's a terrible one, too, when one comes to think of it.'

Mr. Hayward eyed him hard with a quick, half-startled air.

'Yes, terrible certainly,' he answered, with the rapt air of a prophet, 'but inevitable, for all that—a stern duty imposed upon you by your birth and training. Consider, Owen, not only that unhappy country, a brute bulk, bearing, half loath, upon her myriad shoulders the burden of one miserable horror-haunted man—the most wretched of mankind—but your own part in it as well, your own calling and election to avenge and assist her. Remember your father, sent to sicken and die by inches in a Siberian mine; remember your mother, driven mad in the streets of Wilna in her frantic endeavours to carry you and her daughter in safety beyond the Russian frontier. All these things the Romanoffs have done to you and yours in your very own household. What justice can there be for them except in the angry vengeance of their outraged serfs? On you falls that honour. You are summoned to this great work. You should accept it with pride, with gratitude, with aspiration.'

'So I do,' Owen answered, a feeling of shame breaking over him like a wave at even so transient an expression of doubt and hesitancy. 'Trust me, Mr. Hayward, I will be ready when the time comes. Don't fear for my fidelity. I won't fail you in the struggle.'

And, indeed, that manly young Englishman, for such in all essentials he was, really meant it and felt it. Not for nothing had Mr. Hayward taken charge of his youth, and slowly by tentative degrees, as he found his pupil's mind ripe for change, instilled into him all the principles of the fiercest Russian Nihilism. Everything had worked with that cheery, vigorous, enthusiastic English lad in the direction of accepting the faith thus forced upon him. His reverence for Mr. Hayward, at once the gentlest and most powerful mind he had ever known; his horror at the fate of his own father and mother; his native love of freedom, of individuality, of adventure; his sterling English honesty of purpose; his inherited Russian fatalistic tendency—all led him alike to embrace with fervour the strange career Mr. Hayward sketched out for his future. Nihilism had become to him a veritable religion. He had grown up to it from his cradle; he had

heard of it only from the lips of its adherents; he had been taught to regard it as the one remaining resource of an innocent people ground down to the very earth by an intolerable tyranny. So it came to pass that Owen Cazalet, who, from one point of view, as his friends and companions saw him at Moor Hill, was nothing more than a strong and pleasing athletic young Englishman, was, from another point of view, by Mr. Hayward's side, a convinced and unflinching Russian Nihilist.

All day they rode on across the volcanic hills; towards evening they reached the dubious village of Beni-Mengella, whose inhabitants even their tolerant Moorish servant had described to them as very devout and fanatical Mohammedans. At the outskirts of the hamlet three Berbers, clad each in a single loose white robe, not much differing from a nightshirt, met them full in the path.

'Peace be with you,' Mr. Hayward cried out, accosting them in the usual Moslem formula.

'Peace be with all true believers,' the men answered in a surly tone.

The alteration was significant. It meant that even the protection of the Serene Shereefian Umbrella didn't entitle such open rebels against the will of Allah to peace in that village.

'This is ominous,' Mr. Hayward muttered quietly to Owen. 'We may have trouble here. These men refuse to give us peace as we pass. That always means in Islam more or less chance of danger.'

'So much the better,' Owen thought to himself, reddening visibly with excitement.

They rode on in silence up to the *amine's* house. A handsome young Moor, in an embroidered jacket, lounged in a graceful attitude against the richly-carved doorpost. He started as they approached, and then burst into a merry laugh. But—the laugh was Ionê's!

'Well, this *is* odd,' the stranger cried aloud in English, in a very feminine voice. 'You said you were going to Ouarzin. You changed your minds suddenly. What on earth brought you on here?'

'Well—yes; we changed our minds,' Mr. Hayward

answered, with a slight stammer, looking decidedly sheepish; 'we altered our route when we reached the fork in the roads. We heard . . . this village was more likely to afford us something really good in the way of adventure. But you? we've fair reason to question you as well. Didn't you tell us this morning you meant to sleep at Taourist?'

Ionê laughed once more that merry musical laugh of hers, and tossed her fluffy hair off her ears at the same time with an easy movement of her head.

'What fun!' she cried, delighted at the absurd *contre-temps*, in spite of herself. 'Why, I came here, if you must know, on purpose to avoid you. Not out of rudeness, you understand; if it were in England, now, I'd have been most pleased to accept your kind companionship. But, you see, I've come out here all this way to do this journey alone; the whole point of it naturally consists in my riding through Morocco by myself in native clothes, and perhaps getting killed on the way—which would be awfully romantic. So, of course, if I'd allowed you to come on with me, or to follow me up, it'd have spoilt the game; there'd have been no riding alone; it'd have been a personally conducted tour, just the same as the Cookies. Well, that made me turn off at a tangent to Beni-Mengella, for I thought perhaps you two men might be afraid to let me go on by myself, or might go ahead to Taourist on purpose to make sure I got into no trouble. And that, you must see for yourselves, would have put an end at once to my independence. The value of this experiment consists entirely in my going through Morocco alone on my own hired horse, and coming out alive and unhurt at the other end of it.'

Mr. Hayward gazed at her with a somewhat comical ruefulness.

'It *is* unfortunate,' he said slowly. 'But we must put up with it now. I'm sorry we've incommoded you. It's too late to go anywhere else at this hour, I'm afraid, even if there were anywhere else in the neighbourhood to go to.'

'Oh, well, now you're here,' Ionê answered with good-humoured condescension, 'you may as well stay, for,

after all, we had a very jolly evening together yesterday at Ain-Essa, hadn't we? Besides, you know, it's lucky for you in some ways I'm here; for I can tell you these are just about the liveliest and most aggressive Mohammedans I've met anywhere yet; they're war to the knife on infidels, and if you'd come among them alone—without a lady to protect you, I mean—I believe they'd have murdered you as soon as look at you. One or two of them seemed half inclined at first to doubt about the propriety of murdering even *me;* but they've got over that now; I've made things all square with them. I've repeated enough verses from the Koran to satisfy the *amine* himself as to my perfect orthodoxy; and I've Mash-Allah'd till I'm hoarse at every man, woman, and child in the village. Besides, I've made up to the mollah of the mosque. If I say to him, "These are friends of mine," not a soul in the place will dare to touch you.'

As for Owen, in spite of Mr. Hayward's warnings, he didn't pretend to conceal from himself the obvious fact that he was very glad indeed to come again upon Ionê. Not wholly from the point of view of personal liking, either—he had a better reason than that, a more serious reason. It was a point of honour. Their last few words together at Ain-Essa, where they had spent the previous night, had left an abiding sense of terror on his inmost soul. Nobody but Ionê Dracopoli had ever suggested in his hearing the fatal idea that Mr. Hayward was a Russian. And he hadn't had time to impress upon her in full (before he left) the profound necessity of keeping that idea a secret. All day long his conscience had been pricking him for that unwilling disclosure. Had he assented too openly? Had he betrayed Mr. Hayward's trust by too easy an acquiescence? He'd been longing every hour of that tedious march for the chance of seeing Ionê alone once more, to beg her to keep silence; and now that chance had come he was profoundly grateful for it. To him the suspense had in many ways been a terrible one.

He had never had a secret from Mr. Hayward in his life before. That feeling of itself gave him a sense of guilt. But he couldn't pluck up courage to make a clean

breast of it, either. Mr. Hayward would think he might have parried the thrust better. To say the truth, he was ashamed to let his guardian see the painful fact that a girl had got the best of him in a very brief encounter.

Mr. Hayward strolled into the guest-house to arrange about accommodation. While he was gone Owen was left alone at the door for one minute with Ionê. There was no time to be lost. He must seize the opportunity. Such a chance to speak might not occur again. Mustering up all his courage suddenly (for he was a bashful young man), he turned to her at once, and said, in a very earnest tone:

'Miss Dracopoli, I thank heaven I've met you again. I wanted—I needed—I required one word more with you. I daren't tell you why. To do that would be a crime. But I want you to promise me as faithfully as you can you'll never mention to anybody your suspicion that Mr. Hayward's a Russian. It might be death to him if it were known, and death to me, too. I've no time to explain more. He mustn't come out and see me talking to you so. But, for heaven's sake, I beg of you, promise me—do promise me you'll never mention the matter as long as you live to anyone.'

He spoke with concentrated earnestness, like one who really means most profoundly what he says. Ionê glanced at him for a minute, half in doubt, half in amusement, with those big, laughing eyes of hers. She didn't quite know whether to take it as a very good joke or not. Most things in life were very good jokes to Ionê. Then she sobered down suddenly.

'Why—this—is—Nihilism,' she said, word by word, in a very surprised voice. 'No wonder you're alarmed. Yes, this is—just—Nihilism. But you needn't be afraid, Owen Cazalet. I give you my promise. I'll never say a word of it as long as I live to anyone.'

She spoke now as seriously as he had spoken himself. She said it, and she meant it. In a moment the laughing girl saw the full magnitude of the issue at stake, and for once was sobered. Owen glanced at her timidly, and their eyes met again.

'Thank you,' he said, very low in a very timid voice. 'Ten thousand times, thank you.'

'But what's his Russian name?' Ionê asked after a brief pause, half coaxingly, and with true feminine curiosity. 'You *might* tell me that, now. You've as good as admitted it.'

'Ah, but I don't *know* it!' Owen answered very earnestly, without one second's hesitation. 'I haven't heard it myself. He's never once told me.'

His voice had a ring of truth in it. Ionê felt sure from its tone he meant just what he said. She gazed at him curiously once more.

'Never a word of it to anyone,' she repeated, with solemn assurance, wringing his hand in her own. 'I'll cut my tongue out first, for I see you mean it.'

At that moment, as she spoke, Mr. Hayward's face loomed up at the far end of the passage from the courtyard inside. Ionê saw it and was wise. She let Owen's hand drop suddenly.

'And such a funny old Moor with a green turban on his head,' she went on quite loud, in her gayest and most natural voice, as if continuing a conversation on some perfectly *banal* point, 'you never saw in your life. He was fat and dark, and had a mole on his forehead, and he called Allah to witness at every second word he was letting me have that horse dirt cheap for my beautiful eyes, at rather less than half its value.'

'They're dreadful old cheats,' Owen echoed in the same voice; but he felt, all the same, most horribly ashamed of himself.

These petty social deceits sit much heavier on us men than on the lips of women, where they spring spontaneous. And it cut him to the heart to think he was employing such mean feminine wiles against Mr. Hayward.

After that night, he thought to himself bitterly, he'd take very good care never to meet Ionê Dracopoli anywhere again. Though, to be sure, she was the nicest girl he'd ever met in his life, and the freest in the true sense of all he admired in freedom. But still—

the cause! the cause!—for the sake of the cause he'd avoid her like poison. She was a dangerous woman.

More dangerous even than he knew; for of all possible links to bind a man and a woman together for life, almost in spite of themselves, commend me to a secret shared in common.

CHAPTER XI.

MAN PROPOSES.

THAT night at Beni-Mengella was Owen's last meeting with Ionê Dracopoli in Morocco, and he enjoyed it immensely. All through the evening, indeed, Ionê was as gay, as communicative, as frankly confidential, as she had been at Ain-Essa; Owen even fancied she was possibly pleased to meet him again; but if so, it was a pleasure she didn't desire to let pall by too frequent repetition, for next morning, after their native breakfast of fried cakes and cous-cous, Ionê turned one merry forefinger uplifted to Mr. Hayward.

'Now, mind,' she said imperiously, 'this time, no reconsiderations. First thoughts are best. Tell me your tour, and I'll tell you mine. Let's hold by them rigidly. You stick to yours, and I'll stick to my own; then we won't go running up against one another, head foremost, like the people in a farce—exit Mr. Hayward and Owen Cazalet left, enter Ionê Dracopoli, R.U.E., and all that sort of thing. I want to be able to say I rode through Morocco alone "from kiver to kiver." I've almost done it now. Five or six evenings will bring me down to Mogador. Look here: this is my route as far as one can trace it, where there are no proper maps.' And she unfolded Joseph Thomson's rough chart of the Atlas range before him, and indicated, as far as possible, with one plump, white finger, the general idea of her future stopping-places.

Mr. Hayward acquiesced, and took the opposite direction. For his own part, if Ionê were anxious to avoid him, he was ten times more anxious to avoid Ionê.

Of the two tours, therefore, the independent young lady's was finished first. Mr. Hayward and Owen were still riding slowly up steep mule-paths of the mountains in the interior long after Ionê had changed her Turkish trousers and her embroidered Moorish jacket for the tailor-made robe of Regent Street and Piccadilly. As to Owen's later feats in the Atlas, I shall say no more of them here. The untrodden peaks that he climbed, the steep cliffs that he scaled, the strange insects he discovered, the rare plants he brought home—how he withstood the natives at the shrine of Sidi Salah of the High Peak—how he insisted on photographing the Mosque of Abd-er-Rahman, with the Two Tombs in the chief seat of Moslem fanaticism in the far interior—are they not all written with appropriate photogravures in Hayward's 'Mountaineering in Southern Morocco'? Who lists may read them there. For the purposes of this present history they have no further importance; enough to say that at the end of two weeks Owen Cazalet returned by the Cunard steamer to London, a travelled man, and an authority on the vexed points of Atlantic topography.

Immediately on his return, Sacha met him at Euston with important news. A domestic revolution had occurred at Moor Hill during his short absence. Sacha met him at once with unusual excitement for that placid nature.

'You mustn't go down to auntie's to-night,' she said, as soon as he stepped on to the platform; 'you must come to my lodgings and sleep. I want to have a good long talk with you as soon as possible, Owen; I've such lots of things to tell you.'

'Your lodgings!' Owen cried, astonished. 'You're in rooms up in town, then? Why, how's that, Sacha?'

'Oh, it's a long story to tell,' Sacha answered, somewhat flushed herself out of her wonted composure. 'You see you're six weeks in arrears. We haven't been able to write to you. And ever so many queer things have happened in England meanwhile. In the first place—that's the beginning of it all—I've sold my Academy picture.'

'You don't mean to say so!' Owen exclaimed, over-

joyed. 'But not at your own price, surely, Sacha. You know you told us it was quite prohibitive yourself. You put it so high just for the dignity of art, you said.'

Sacha's not unbecoming blush mantled deeper with conscious success.

'Well, not exactly that,' she answered. 'I knew the price was prohibitive—or, at least, I believed so; but I reckoned its value in accordance with what anybody was likely to give for it. It was *worth* a hundred and fifty, so I asked a hundred and fifty for it. And a great Manchester buyer snapped it up like a shot, paying the price down without a word; and he told me afterwards he'd got it on the advice of a famous critic—he wouldn't say who, but I think I know—and that if I'd asked for two hundred I should have had it.'

'You don't mean to say so!' Owen cried, pleased and proud. 'Well, that's splendid news! Though you deserve it, Sacha, you know; I'm sure you deserve it. I've always said myself you'd be a very great artist one of these days—a very, very great artist—like Madame Lebrun or Rosa Bonheur.'

Sacha smiled demurely. It was no small joy to her to get such praise from Owen, for she believed in her brother.

'Well, then, dear,' she went on, 'you see, that made me a rich woman outright all at once, for he gave me a cheque for the whole of the money in a lump—a hundred and fifty pounds at a single go, and all earned by myself, too. Isn't it just delightful? Is this your bag? Then put it in a hansom and come with me to my rooms. I'm in lodgings close by, while we look after the papering and furnishing in Victoria Street.'

'The *what?*' Owen cried, throwing his portmanteau in front as if it weighed a pound or two, and taking his seat by her side, bewildered and astonished.

'Oh, I forgot; that's part of the history,' Sacha answered, running on. 'Why, the fact of it is, Owen, being a rich woman now, I've left Moor Hill for good, and Aunt Julia too, and determined to come and live in town on my own scale in future.'

'And give up the studio!' Owen cried regretfully.

'Oh, I shall have a studio in our flat, of course,' Sacha replied, with a slight sigh. 'Though, naturally, it *was* a wrench—I don't deny it—to give up the dear old five-cornered nook at the Red Cottage. But I felt it was necessary. For a long time I have realized the fact that it was artistic stagnation to live down where we did—in the depths of Surrey. In art, you know, Owen, one wants constant encouragement, stimulation, criticism. One ought to be dropping perpetually into other men's rooms'—Sacha said it as naturally as if she were a man herself—'to see how they're getting on, how they're developing their ideas, and whether they're improving them or spoiling them in the course of the painting. One ought to have other men dropping perpetually into one's own rooms to look on in return, and praising one or slanging one as the case demands, or, at any rate, observing, discussing, suggesting, modifying. I felt I was making no progress at all in my art at Moor Hill. I stuck just where I'd got to when I left Paris. So, when this great stroke of luck came, I said to myself at once, "Now I'm a painter launched. I shall be rich in future. I must do justice to my art, and live in the very thick of the artistic world. I must move in the swim. I must go up to London." And that's how we decided on this flat in Victoria Street, which we're now engaged in furnishing and decorating.'

'But what does Aunt Julia say?' Owen exclaimed, a little taken aback by so much unexpected precipitancy.

Sacha suppressed a slight smile.

'Dear old Aunt Julia!' she said, with a faint undercurrent of amusement in her earnest voice. 'Well, you know just what she'd say, Owen! Aunt Julia can never understand us modern girls. She thinks the world's turned topsy-turvy in a lump, and that everything womanly's gone and vanished clean out of it. She put's it all down, though, to dear mother's blood. Aurora, she says, was always flighty. And no doubt she's right, too, in her way. It's from mother, I expect, Owen, that I inherit the artistic tendency and many other things in my nature. In her it came out in the form of music; in me it comes out in the form of painting. But it's the same impulse at

bottom, you know, whichever turn it takes. There's nothing of the sort about Aunt Julia, certainly.'

'They must have been singularly different in type, no doubt,' Owen mused with a sigh. 'Of course I can't remember poor mother, myself, Sacha; but from all you've told me, all I've heard from Mr. Hayward, she must have been the opposite pole from poor dear Aunt Julia.'

'Well, they were only half-sisters, you see,' Sacha answered in an apologetic tone. 'And I fancy *our* grandmother must have been a very different person indeed from the first Mrs. Cazalot. Certainly, you can't imagine Aunt Julia going off on her own account as a public singer to Berlin and Vienna, or marrying a Russian like poor father, or trying to escape with us under a feigned name, or, in fact, doing anything else that wasn't perfectly British and ordinary and commonplace and uninteresting.'

'Aunt Julia was born to be a decorous English old maid,' Owen interposed, laughing. 'She'd have missed her vocation in life if anybody'd happened to propose to her and married her.'

'Yes, and when she heard we were going to take a flat in town together—three girls alone—and have latch-keys of our own and nobody to chaperon us—why, I thought, poor dear thing! she'd have fainted on the spot. But what horrified her most was our grandest idea of all—that we're to be independent and self-supporting—self-sufficient, in fact, or at least self-sufficing. We mean to do our own work and to keep no servants.'

'That's good!' Owen exclaimed, seized at once with the idea, in the true vein of the family. 'That's splendid, I declare! So advanced! so Socialistic! Only, I say, Sacha, you'll want some one to do the heavy work of the house. I expect I'll have to come up to town as well and live with you as hall-porter.'

'I don't think so,' Sacha answered, gazing admiringly as always at that fresh strong frame of his. 'I'm pretty able-bodied myself, you know; the Selistoffs were always a race of giants, Mr. Hayward says; and though Blackbird's a tiny feeble wee thing—you've heard me speak

of Blackbird—Hope Braithwaite, you know, that poor little girl with a soul and no body who composes such sweet songs—though Blackbird's not up to much, Ionê Dracopoli's quite strong enough, I'm sure, to do the work of a household.'

'Ionê Dracopoli!' Owen cried, in an almost ironical agony of mingled surprise and despair. 'You don't mean to say Ionê Dracopoli's going to live with you?'

'Oh, didn't I tell you that at first?' Sacha exclaimed, suddenly remembering herself. 'I suppose, having heard from her a lively account of how she met you in her Turkish costume on top of some high mountain in Morocco somewhere, I forgot you hadn't learned all about it from herself already. She was quite full of you when she returned; she says you're so strong, and so handsome, and so interesting. But, of course, all this has turned up since then. Well, let me see; this is just how it happened. After I sold my picture and came up to town to these lodgings, where I'm taking you now, I proposed to Blackbird, who is miserable at home—all her people are Philistines—that she should come and take rooms with me as a social experiment, and we should run a small flat on mutual terms together. So while we were still on the hunt, looking at rooms and rooms, Ionê Dracopoli turned up in town, Turkish trousers and all, and was taken up, of course, as a nine days' wonder. The Old Girls' Club, at college, gave her a breakfast one day, which I attended, naturally; and there she heard of my plan, and fell in with it heart and soul. She wanted to be one of us. She says there were always three Graces, and she must be number three; and as for going without a servant, that was the dream of her existence. We two others were naturally glad enough to get her, for we'd been hunting in vain for a flat small enough and cheap enough to suit our purses; and Ionê has money, so that by clubbing together we can do much better. Well, the end of it all was we've taken a dear little place behind Victoria Street, Westminster, and in a week from to-day we mean to move into it.'

Owen's heart beat fast. This was a terrible ordeal.

He'd fully made up his mind never to see Ionê as long as he lived again. But he couldn't promise to give up paying visits to Sacha. There was nobody so near him or so sympathetic as she was. And though she didn't know all his relations with Mr. Hayward—including the reasons why he was going into the diplomatic service—she was the only living soul on earth, besides his guardian, with whom he could allude in any way to the secret of his birth or his Russian origin. To everybody else he was just Miss Cazalet's nephew, the son of that half-sister who married somewhere abroad, and whose husband was supposed to have died in disgrace in Canada or Australia.

For the sake of the Cause, he dreaded the prospect of seeing much more of Ionê.

CHAPTER XII.

FINE ART.

At the Academy, those same days, Lady Beaumont one afternoon strolled vacantly through the rooms, doing the honours of English art to her friend, Madame Mireff.

'Yes, Sir Frederick's are charming,' she said languidly, deigning a glance as she passed through the aristocratic outrage; 'but then Sir Frederick, of course, is *always* charming. Besides,' with a sigh of relief, 'I saw them all in his studio before they came here, you know,' which absolved her accordingly from the disagreeable necessity of pretending to look at them now. 'So exquisitely graceful, aren't they? Such refinement! Such feeling!—— Well, she answered me back to my face, my dear, "As good as you are, my lady." Those were her very words, I assure you—"as good as you are, my lady." So, after that, of course, it was quite impossible for me to dream of keeping her on one minute longer. My husband went in and packed her off immediately. Sir Arthur's not a violent man—for a soldier, that is to say—and since he went into Parliament, between you and me, his temper's been like a lamb compared to what it

used to be when we were out in India; but that morning, I'll admit, he flared up like a haycock. He sent her packing at once, passage paid, by the first train to Calais. So there I was, my dear—yes, a sweet thing, really; he does these Venetian scenes so well; a pleasant man, too; he dined with us on Saturday—so there I was at Grindelwald, left high and dry, without a maid to my name; and as I'm about as incapable as a babe unborn of dressing my own hair myself, I had to go over to Interlaken next morning early to get it done up by a *coiffeur*, and then, if you can believe me, I was forced to sleep in it for three nights at a stretch without taking it down—wasn't it ridiculous, *figurez vous*—just like a South Sea Islander with a neck prop—till Arthur had got out a new maid for me by telegraph from London.'

Madame Mireff smiled.

'What a slavery,' she said quietly, 'to be so dependent on a maid that one can't even go to bed in comfort without her! It reminds me of those slave-making ants Professor Sergueyeff told me about in Petersburg the other day, which can't even feed themselves unless there's a slave ant by their sides to put the food into their mouths, but die of starvation in the midst of plenty.'

Lady Beaumont stifled a yawn.

'Arthur says in a hundred years there'll be no servants at all,' she drawled out in her weary way. 'The girls and the men of the lower orders will all be too fine and too well educated to wait upon us. But I tell him, thank Heaven! they'll last *my* time, and that's enough for me. I couldn't do without. After us, the deluge.'

'That's a beautiful thing over there,' Madame Mireff put in, interrupting her. 'No, *not* the little girl with the drum; that's not my taste at all; I'm sick of your English little girls in neat, tight black stockings. The one beside it, I mean—827, Greek Maidens playing Ball. It's so free and graceful; so much life and movement in it.'

'It *is* pretty,' Lady Beaumont assented, putting up her quizzing-glass once more, with as much show of interest as she could muster up in a mere painted picture. 'I forget who it's by, though. But I've seen it before,

I'm sure. It must have been in one of the studios, I expect, on Show Sunday.'

Madame Mireff hunted it up in the catalogue—a rare honour at her hands, for her taste was fastidious.

'Aspasia's School-days,' she read out, 'Alexandra M. Cazalet.'

'Oh dear yes, to be sure!' Lady Beaumont cried, with a sudden flash of reminiscence. 'How stupid of me to forget! I ought to have remembered it. I'm glad Arthur wasn't here; he'd be vexed at my having forgotten. A county member's wife, he says, should make a point of remembering everybody and everything in the whole division. And I saw it till I was sick of it, too, in her studio at Moor Hill. So it is, I declare, Sacha Cazalet's picture.'

Madame Mireff caught at the name with true Slavonic quickness.

'Sacha,' she repeated—'Sacha Cazalet! Why, she must be partly Russian. That's a Russian word, Sacha—it's short for Alexandra, too—and her name's Alexandra. Her mother must be a Slav. . . . And that's no doubt why I like her work so well. There's Russian feeling throughout, in both subject and execution; such intensity, such fervour, such self-restraint, such deep realism.'

'She lives down our way,' Lady Beaumont remarked, with a casual glance at the intensity. 'She's a queer, reserved girl, self-restrained, as you say; a little too much so, perhaps, for me; and she has such a dreadful old woman for an aunt—old maid—you know the type; shedding tracts as she goes; red flannel; Dorcas meetings. Oh, quite too dreadful for anything in her black silk dress and her appalling black bonnet, with a bunch of mauve flowers in it. But there's no avoiding her. In the country, you see, a member of Parliament's wife must know the most ghastly people—you can't imagine what a trial it is. A smile and a kind inquiry—so—after rheumatics or babies—for every old frump or old bore you meet on the footpath. Ugh! It's just too sickening. . . . But I never heard anybody say Sacha Cazalet was a Russian.'

'What's the aunt's name?' Madame Mireff asked suddenly, for no reason in particular, except that 'twas part of her mission to follow up every clue about every known or suspected Russian family in England.

'Why, Cazalet, of course,' Lady Beaumont answered at once, without pretending to any great interest either in person or picture. 'They're all three of them Cazalets.'

'Then they're her brother's children, whoever they are,' Madame went on rapidly, 'this Miss Sacha and the rest; or else, of course, their name couldn't be Cazalet, too. Who was their mother, I wonder?'

Lady Beaumont paused and stood still. It was too much effort for her to walk and think at the same time.

'Well, I never thought of that before,' she said, looking puzzled for a moment. 'You see, they're not in our set exactly; we only know them as we're obliged to know everybody in the division—on political grounds, that is to say—garden-party once a year—hardly more than what you might call a bowing acquaintance. But it's odd her name's Cazalet, too, now you suggest it, for I've always understood Sacha's mother and the old lady were half-sisters or something. . . . Perhaps she married a cousin, though. . . . But at any rate they're Cazalets, this girl and her brother Owen, a great giant of a fellow who gets prizes at sports for jumping and running.'

'And yet they call her Sacha,' Madame ruminated, undeterred. 'Well, that's certainly odd; for Sacha's real Russian. Though, to be sure, in England nowadays you call a girl anything. No language is safe from you. I've met a dozen Olgas at least since I came to London. . . . And how old's this Sacha Cazalet? She paints beautifully, anyhow.'

'About twenty-five or twenty-six, I should say,' Lady Beaumont answered at a guess. 'And Owen must be twenty or a little over. Let me see; he was a baby in arms when he first came to Moor Hill, the year our Algy was born. Algy's twenty in August. The little girl was four or five then; and that's just twenty years ago.'

Madame Mireff all the while was examining the picture closely.

'Very Slavonic,' she said at last, drawing back and posing in front to take it all in; 'very Slavonic, certainly. . . . Pure Verestchagin, that girl there. And you say they came to Moor Hill twenty years ago now. How? —from where?—with whom?—was their mother with them?'

She spoke so sharply and inquisitively, in spite of her soft roundness of face and form, that Lady Beaumont, with her society languor, was half annoyed at such earnestness.

'I think it was from Canada,' the Englishwoman answered, with still more evident unconcern, as if the subject bored her. 'But I never asked the old aunt body much about it. I had no interest in the children; they were nothing to me. I believe their mother was dead, and something or other unmentionable had happened to their father. But Miss Cazalet was never very communicative on the point, because I believe the sister had gone and disgraced them in some way—went on the stage, I fancy I've heard—or, at any rate, didn't come up to the district-visiting standard of social conduct. I never heard the rights or the wrongs of the story myself. Why should I, indeed? They were not in our society.'

'Have they any friends—the boy and girl, I mean?' Madame Mireff asked once more, with the same evident cagerness. 'Who are the father's people? Don't they ever come across to see these two children—from Canada or anywhere?'

Lady Beaumont reflected.

'I don't think so,' she answered, after a pause. 'There's a guardian of the boy's, to be sure—or somebody they choose to call a guardian. But he comes very seldom. I saw him there this summer, though. A very odd man, with the manners of a prince, who's been everywhere in the world, and knows absolutely everything.'

'A foreigner?' Madame asked, adopting the English phrase and applying it with tentative caution to her own countrymen.

'Oh dear no, an Englishman. At least, so they said.

His name's Hayward, anyhow, and that's English enough for anybody, I should think. He's nobody in particular, either—just a photographer in Bond Street. He calls himself Mortimer and Co. in business.'

Madame made a mental note of the name at once.

'I'll go there and get photographed,' she said. 'I can ask about them then. Besides, I'm in want of a new portrait just now. I haven't got any in stock. Lord Caistor asked me to give him one yesterday.'

And she subsided into a seat, holding that plump hand up to her round face coquettishly.

'They say he's quite a conquest of yours,' Lady Beaumont suggested, with a mischievous look.

'Oh, my dear, they'd say anything. Why, they say I'm an emissary of the Czar's, and an unaccredited agent, and a spy, and an adventuress, and I'm sure I don't know what else. They'll be saying I'm a Nihilist next, or a princess, or a pretender. The fact of it is, a Russian lady can't show the faintest patriotic pride or interest in her country in England without all the newspapers making their minds up at once she's a creature of the Government.'

And Madame crossed one white hand resignedly over the other.

'That's a lovely bracelet, Olga!' Lady Beaumont cried, turning with delight at last to a more congenial topic.

Madame unclasped it and handed it to her.

'Yes, it's pretty,' she answered; 'and, what I prize still more, it's through and through Russian. The gold is from the Ural mines on General Selistoff's property. The sapphires are Siberian, from my uncle's government. The workmanship's done by a famous jeweller in Moscow. The inscription's in old Slavonic—our sacred Russian tongue. And the bracelet itself was given me by our dear good Empress. Hayward—no, Mortimer and Co.—photographers, Bond Street. I won't forget the name. Here's her miniature in this locket. She was a darling, our Empress!'

'You belonged to her household once, I think?' Lady Beaumont murmured.

The remotest fringe of royalty interested the county member's wife profoundly.

'I belonged to her household once—yes. I was a lady-in-waiting. The Imperial family has always been pleased to be kind to the Mireffs. Prince Ruric Brassoff was there, too, in my time. Well, it's a beautiful picture, Sacha Cazalet's. Let's go away now, Anastasia. After that dreamy Russian vision I don't care to look any more at your stodgy English middle-class portraits.'

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HIGHER EDUCATION OF WOMEN.

A WEEK later Owen ran up by morning train from Moor Hill to see Sacha and her friends installed at their ease in their own new flat a little behind Victoria Street.

The flat itself, to be sure, with most of its inorganic contents, he had fully inspected already. It was daintily pretty in its modern—its very modern—way, with high white frieze of lincrusta and delicate yellow wall-paper; and Sacha had expended upon it with loving interest all the taste and care of an authority on decoration.

But this morning he came rather with somewhat trembling heart, to view 'the elective family,' as Sacha called it—'the miniature phalanstery,' Owen christened it himself—settled down in its new abode, and to face the ordeal of a first meeting with Ionê Dracopoli in the ordinary everyday garb of feminine Christendom.

He touched the electric bell at the outer door with one timid finger. It flew open of itself, after our modern magic fashion; and Sacha's voice was heard from a dim distance down the passage crying out, 'Come in,' in most audible accents. Owen followed the direction of the voice towards the drawing-room at the end, and entered the pretty white-and-yellow apartment in a flutter of expectation.

His first feeling on looking round was a vague con-

sciousness of relief. Ionê wasn't there. How lucky! And how provoking!

Sacha jumped up and greeted him with a sisterly kiss. Then she turned towards a long wicker chair with its back to the door.

'This is Blackbird,' she said simply, waving her hand in that direction; and Owen bowed his most distinguished consideration.

'What a shame, Sacha!' a full rich voice broke out from the depths of the chair, where Owen at first hadn't noticed anybody sitting; 'fancy introducing one that way! This is your brother, I suppose? But please don't let him think my name's really Blackbird.'

Owen peered into the long chair whence the voice proceeded, and saw a frail little woman stretched out in it lazily—a frail little woman who ought to have been eighteen, to judge by her development, but who, as Sacha had already informed him, was really twenty-seven. She was tiny, like a doll—not short, but small and dainty; and as she lounged there at full length with two pallid hands clasped loose behind her shapely head, and neck thrown back carelessly, she looked too fragile for this earth—a mere delicate piece of semi-transparent Dresden china. Blackbird was dark and large-eyed; her eyes, indeed, though by no means too prominent, seemed somehow her most distinct and salient feature. Such eyes Owen had never seen in his life before. They were black and lustrous, and liquid like a gazelle's; and they turned upon him plaintively and flooded him with sad light every time she spoke to him. Otherwise, the frail little woman was neither exactly pretty nor yet what one could fairly describe as plain. She was above all things interesting. A profound pity for her evident feebleness was the first feeling she inspired. 'Poor wee little thing!' one felt inclined to say as one saw her. A fatherly instinct, indeed, would have tempted most men to lay one hand caressingly on her smooth black hair, as they took her pale thin fingers in their own with the other. But her smile was sweet, though very full of pensiveness. A weary little soul, Owen thought to him-

self as he gazed, weighed down by the burden of this age's complexity.

'No, her name's not really Blackbird, of course,' Sacha responded quietly, in her matter-of-fact tone, looking down with a motherly glance at the shrinking figure in the low wicker chair. 'Her name, to be official, is Hope Merle Braithwaite. There, now—is that definite enough? Mr. Cazalet—Miss Braithwaite. You know her songs, Owen—and so you know herself. She is all one song. She evaporates in music. That's why I call her Blackbird, you see'—and Sacha smoothed her friend's head lovingly; 'she's so tiny and so dark, and she's got so much voice in her for such a wee little bit of a thing. When she sings, she always reminds me of a blackbird on a thorn-bush, pouring its full throat in a song a great deal too big for it. You know the way their throats seem to swell and burst with the notes? Well, Blackbird's throat does just the same. She wastes herself in music.'

Blackbird unclasped her hands from behind her neck, and shook her head solemnly. Owen observed now it was well shaped, and covered with straight glossy hair, as black and as shiny as her namesake's plumage.

'Pure poetical fancy, evolved after the fact,' she said, smiling sadly, with the air of a woman who shatters against the grain one more cherished delusion. 'The reality's this: My parents were good enough to christen me Merle, after my Swiss relations, the Merle d'Aubignés; and I'm called Merle at home, though I was Hope at Oxford. And when Sacha heard the name, she thought it extremely appropriate to my dark hair and eyes, and she Englished it as Blackbird. That's the whole truth of the matter. All this other imaginative nonsense about pouring my throat in song came *ex post facto*. It has nothing to do with the name. So there's how myth grows.'

And she folded the two pale hands resignedly in front of her.

Owen noted that '*ex post facto*' with becoming awe. Not for nothing had Blackbird studied dead tongues at Oxford.

'Well, what do you think of the flat?' Sacha asked, with a compassionate glance at the poor weak little pessimist. 'We've got it up nicely into form now, haven't we? Take a good look round the room, and then come and see my studio.'

'You've done wonders,' Owen answered, gazing about him, well pleased. 'And it's charming—charming! How lovely you've made that corner there, with those draperies and pipkins, and my Morocco mud-ware, too; so deliciously Oriental. That's Miss Braithwaite's, I suppose, the grand piano in the corner?'

The frail girl looked up at him with those great sad eyes.

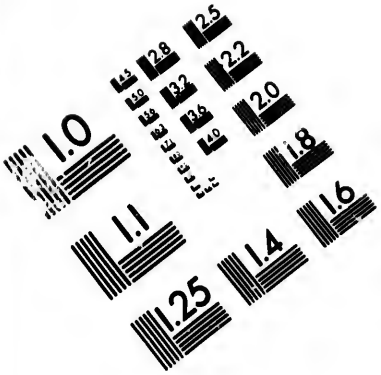
'*Not* Miss Braithwaite,' she said calmly. And Owen noticed now at once a certain obvious disparity, as Sacha had suggested, between the full musical voice and the slender frame that produced it. 'Not Miss Braithwaite, if you please. Sacha's arranged all that already. She's a splendid hand at arranging things—Sacha; she bosses the show, Ionê says, and I must admit she bosses it beautifully. So nice to have all the bother of living taken off your hands by a capable, masterful, practical person. That's what I admire so in Sacha. Well, she's decided that we're all to be one family here—a pantisocracy, Ionê calls it; no Miss and no Misters. You're to be Owen, and I'm to be Blackbird. Ionê's cook—she's out marketing now; and Sacha and I've just washed up the breakfast things. So, of course, it's absurd, in such a household as this, to think of calling one another Mr. What's-his-name or Miss So-and-So.'

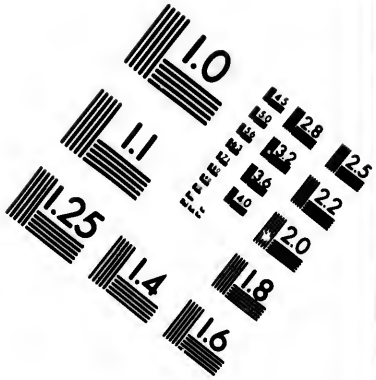
'I don't see why, I'm sure,' Owen answered, much amused. 'A lady's none the less a lady, surely, because she can do something useful about her own house, as our grandmothers used to do.'

'But our grandmothers knew no Greek,' Blackbird replied, going off at a most illogical tangent. 'It's the combination that kills us, you know—Greek and household drudgery.'

'Come and see my studio,' Sacha interposed cheerily, leading the way to the next room.

It was Sacha's business to cut the little pessimist short





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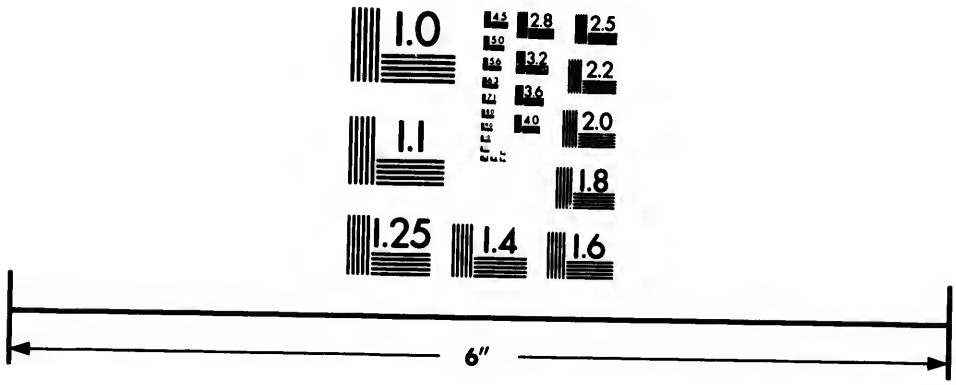

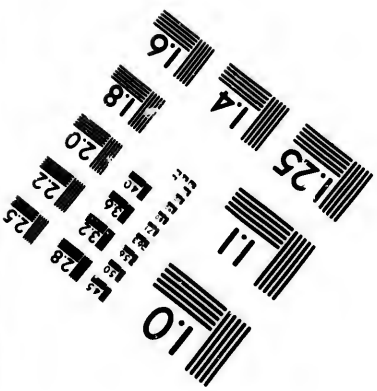

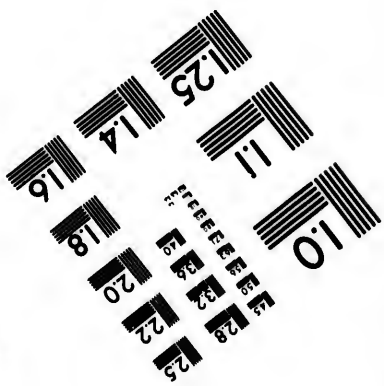

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whenever possible. And when the studio had been duly inspected they went on to the dining-room, and the bedrooms, and the kitchen, and the pantry, and the little scullery at the back, and a stone-floored office behind, full of chemical apparatus.

'Why, what's this?' Owen asked, surprised. 'Is Miss Dracopoli scientific, then, as well as literary?'

'Oh dear no!' Blackbird answered with a languid drawl, but always in that same rich voice; 'Ionê's nothing on earth. Like Du Maurier's Postlethwaite, she's content to "exist beautifully." This is *my* laboratory, this room. But I've promised the girls never to make any *dreadfully* odorous stews in it. I couldn't get along without a laboratory, you know. I must have somewhere to do my chemical experiments.'

Owen scanned the frail little body from head to foot, alarmed. Was this what female education was leading our girls to?

'Greek—music—chemistry!' he exclaimed, gazing down upon her five feet two from the calm height of his own towering masculine stature. 'You don't mean to say you combine them all in your own sole person?'

'And not much of a person at that!' Blackbird answered, with a faint sigh. 'Yes, that's how I was brought up. It's the fault of the system. My raw material all went off in brain and nerves, I'm afraid. I worked those so hard, there was nothing at all left to build up blood and bone and flesh and muscle.'

'But why on earth did you do it?' Owen couldn't help exclaiming; for Blackbird's frank remark was so obviously true. It might be rude of him to admit it, but he didn't feel inclined to contradict a lady.

'I *didn't* do it,' Blackbird answered piteously. 'It was my people who educated me. You see, they thought I was clever—perhaps I was to start with; and they crammed me with everything on earth a girl could learn. Latin, Greek, modern languages, mathematics, natural science, music, drawing, dancing, till I was stuffed to the throat with them. *Je suis jusque là*,' and she put her hand to her chin with some dim attempt at feminine playfulness. 'Like Strasbourg geese,' she added slowly

in a melancholy after-thought; 'it may be good for the brain, but it's precious bad for the body.'

Owen stretched his big shoulders back, and expanded his chest involuntarily. The mere sight of that weak frame seemed to make him assert his own physical prowess by automatic contrast.

'But why do you go on with it now?' he asked simply. 'Why continue to work at this chemistry, for example? In poky London rooms you want all the fresh air you can get, surely. How infinitely better, now, instead of chemistry, to join a lawn-tennis club!'

Blackbird shrank back as if terrified.

'A lawn-tennis club?' she cried, all amazed. 'Oh dear! they'd be so rough. They'd knock one about so. I can't bear being bullied. That's why I like Sacha and Ionê so much; they're strong, but they don't bully you. Oh dear! oh dear! *I* could never play tennis. I've been brought up to mix chemicals, and read books, and compose music: and it's like a reflex action now. I compose automatically; I test for acids like a machine. I've learnt to do these things till I can't get on without doing them.'

Sacha turned to him quickly, and said something short in a language which Blackbird didn't understand, good linguist though she was. But Owen knew that the Russian sentence she uttered so fast meant this in effect:

'That's just why I took her to live with us here She's so frail and frightened; she needs somebody bright to put sunshine in her life—somebody strong and strong-willed to protect her and encourage her.'

'My own people are strong, you know,' Blackbird went on in the same plaintive voice, watching a still as she spoke, 'and they always bully me. They're Philistines, of course; but, do you know, I think Philistines are really the very worst on education. From the day I was born, almost, they kept me constantly at it. Papa's a colonial broker, though I'm sure I don't know what he brokes, or what broking is; but he decided from the time I was a baby in arms I was to be thoroughly well educated. And educated I was—oh my, it's just dreadful

to me even now to look back upon it! Music from the time I could hardly finger the piano, Greek as soon as I knew my English letters, mathematics when most girls are only beginning arithmetic. Strum, strum, strum, from breakfast to bed-time. And then at seventeen I was sent to Lady Margaret. That was the first happy time I ever knew in my life. The girls were so nice to me. There was one girl, I remember——'

But at that moment a latchkey turned sharp in the door, and a light foot entered. The sunshine had come. Owen turned round with a beating heart.

'Is that Ionê Dracopoli?' he asked, trembling, of Sacha.

And even as he spoke a tripping figure, with a basket held gaily in one hand, burst quickly into the laboratory.

'Why, here's Owen!' the girl cried, seizing both his hands like an old friend. 'I thought I heard his voice. Well, I do call this jolly!'

CHAPTER XIV.

IONÊ IN ENGLAND.

When Owen had recovered his breath enough to take a good look at her, he saw in a moment for himself Ionê was simply charming.

In Morocco he had wondered vaguely more than once in his own mind how much of her nameless magic at first sight was due merely to the oddity and piquancy of her dress and the quaintness of the circumstances. You don't expect to meet a stray English girl every day pervading untrodden Atlas in male Moorish attire, and astride on her saddle-horse like a man and a brother.

'Perhaps,' he had said to himself, trying to reason down his admiration for Mr. Hayward's sake and in the interests of the cause, 'perhaps if one saw her in London in ordinary English clothes one would think no more of her than of the average young woman one takes down any day in the week to dinner.'

Well, he had the opportunity now of testing this half-formed idea, and he found it break down in practice most conclusively. Ionê was beautiful—not a doubt in the world about that—as bright, as taking, nay, even, for that matter, as original and as free, in her Liberty dress as even in the embroidered jacket and loose Turkish trousers of her North African experiences.

A beautiful girl—fresh, fair, and vivacious; a perfect contrast to Blackbird, in her fluffy chestnut hair, her vitality, her strength; to Sacha, in her boundless spirits, her quick ways, her flowing talk, her very boisterousness and cheeriness.

'So here's Owen,' she repeated after a moment, turning the contents of her basket out on the scullery table with delicious frankness. 'Well, this is just too nice for anything! I'm so glad I've not missed you. Come along, then, Owen, and make yourself generally useful in the kitchen, like a good fellow. You may help me, if you like, to get the lunch things ready!'

There was a fall in Russians. Mr. Hayward and the cause went instantly down to zero. Owen was conscious at that moment of only two objects in the whole round world, Ionê Dracopoli and a violent palpitation under his own left waistcoat.

Never was luncheon prepared by so many cooks as that one. This was their first morning in the flat, so they were new to the work as yet; and, besides, flirtation and cookery went hand-in-hand together. 'Twas Arcadia in Pimlico. Ionê, in her soft woollen terra-cotta gown, with white apron in front, and man-cook's cap confining her free chestnut locks above, looked even prettier than ever in her new capacity. Owen held the saucepans for her to mix things in, as in the seventh heaven, or stirred the custard on the stove with rapturous fingers. Sacha prepared the meat, and took charge of the fire and the oven. Blackbird sat by, and exercised a general critical supervision of a pessimistic character. She knew the soup could never turn out right like that, and she had the gloomiest possible views of her own as to the success of the lemon cheese-cakes. But the event

didn't justify the Cassandra of the flat, for lunch, when it arrived, was most brilliantly successful.

About three o'clock, however, as they rested from their toil after washing up the dishes, there came a ring at the bell, and Ionê, who had peeped out with intent to answer it, drew her head back suddenly, spying strangers through the stained-glass panels of the outer door.

'Goodness gracious, girls!' she cried, all agog, glancing down at her apron, 'what shall we ever do? I declare, it's visitors!'

'Visitors!' Sacha replied. 'And already! Impossible!'

Ionê seized Owen most unceremoniously by the arm, and pushed him forward into the passage.

'You go and answer it, Owen,' she said, laughing. 'You're the most presentable of the lot; and it's men, I think—gentlemen.'

Owen went to the door. Sure enough, two strangers stood there, in the neatest of frockcoats and the glossiest of tall hats, with hothouse flowers in their buttonholes—a couple of men about town, Owen thought to himself, with fine contempt at first sight, if ever he saw a pair. They were aged about thirty, and looked as though their collars were their main object in life. Owen took a prejudice against them at a glance. These fellows were too dapper and too well groomed by far for the big-limbed athlete's rough country-bred fancy.

'I beg your pardon,' the tallest and handsomest of the two said, with an apologetic air—he wore a gardenia in his buttonhole. 'I think we must have made a mistake. Does Miss Braithwaite live here?'

Owen held the door ajar dubiously in his hand, and blocked the entrance with his big frame, as he answered, in no friendly voice:

'She does. Do you want to see her?'

The young man with the gardenia answered, more modestly than Owen expected:

'Well, we'd like to send our cards in, and if Miss Braithwaite's not engaged we'd be much obliged if she could spare us just a very few minutes.'

He handed Owen his card as he spoke. Owen glanced

at it and read, 'Mr. Trevor Gardener.' The gardenia was his mark, as it were—a sort of *armoiries parlantes*.

The other man, who was shorter and darker, and wore an orchid in his buttonhole, handed his at the same time. It bore the name, 'Henley Stokes, 5, Pump Court, Temple.'

Owen couldn't say why, but the glossy tall hats and the neat frockcoats put his back up inexpressibly. He retreated down the passage with a hobbledehoy's awkwardness, leaving the two men standing sheepish at the open door, and said, in a loud voice, more plainly than politely, as he laid down the cards on the drawing-room table:

'Two fellows outside, come to call upon Blackbird.'

'Show them in!' Sacha replied, with as much dignity as if he were her footman instead of her brother; and Owen ushered them promptly into the bright little drawing-room.

Mr. Gardener, with the gardenia, was, like Paul, the chief speaker. To be sure, he'd never met Blackbird before, that was clear, nor had his friend either. They both bowed distantly with a certain awed respect as they took their seats, and as Blackbird introduced them informally to the remainder of the company. But for a minute or two they talked society small-talk about flats in general, and this flat in particular, without explaining the special business that had brought them there that afternoon. They began well, indeed, by admiring everything in the room, from floor to ceiling. But Owen noticed now, somewhat appeased, that in spite of their hats and coats they were distinctly nervous. They seemed to have something they wanted to say, without being able to muster up the needful courage for saying it.

At last the man with the gardenia ventured to turn to Blackbird with a point-blank remark:

'I dare say you're wondering, Miss Braithwaite, what made us come to call upon you.'

'Well, I confess,' Blackbird said languidly, in that rich, clear voice of hers, 'I *did* rather ask myself what on earth you wanted with me.'

Mr. Trevor Gardener paused, and looked straight into her big eyes. He was more nervous than ever; but he made a clean breast of it.

'I'm at the Stock Exchange,' he said at last, after a long-drawn interval. 'In point of fact, I'm . . . I'm a broker.'

'That's bad!' Ionê put in, with a twinkling eye full of mischief.

Mr. Gardener turned full upon her a look of most obvious relief. His face brightened visibly.

'Why, just so,' he said, more at his ease. 'That's precisely what I always say myself. That's the reason I've come. A stockbroker's bad. Most useless excrescence on the community, a stockbroker.'

'Exactly,' Sacha interposed, with her grave, quiet voice. 'A middleman who performs no good service of any sort.'

Mr. Gardener brightened still more.

'Ah, there it is, you see,' he answered, rubbing his hands together, well pleased. 'I feel it myself, and so does Stokes, who's a barrister. He feels the Bar's a fraud. That's what emboldened us to come. We're weighed down by a sense of our own utter uselessness.'

'A very hopeful symptom,' Sacha responded, smiling. 'Conviction of sin comes first, repentance afterwards. But how did you happen to hear of us?'

Mr. Gardener pulled up his shirt-collar and rearranged his cuffs to hide his embarrassment.

'Well,' we've the pleasure of knowing Mr. Braithwaite,' he answered very tentatively.

'Oh, indeed!' Blackbird replied, in a tone which showed clearly that acquaintance with her father was no particular introduction to her.

'In business!' Mr. Gardener interposed deferentially, as who would deprecate her criticism. 'And we're musical—very musical. We hoped on that ground, at least—though perhaps we're intruding.'

And he glanced at Owen, who sat, silent, on the defensive.

'Not at all,' Owen answered, much mystified, though

with no very good grace. 'We're pleased, I'm sure, to see you.'

'Well, we were dining at Mr. Braithwaite's club with him last night,' the man with the gardenia went on, looking askance at Blackbird, who sat in the long chair toying languidly with a fan, 'and he happened to mention this compound household of yours, and what persons composed it. And it interested us very much, because we've both sung your songs, Miss Braithwaite, and both loved your music; and we've read Miss Dracopoli's delightful tale on Morocco in the *Bi-monthly Review* with very great interest; and we've admired Miss Cazalet's Greek girls at the Academy. And though Mr. Braithwaite gave us, perhaps, a somewhat unfavourable version of your aims and ideas—indeed, threw cold water upon them—I may venture to say we sympathized with your desire for a simpler mode of life.' He glanced down at his spotless shoes with a sort of mute deprecation, and grew more inarticulate still as the subject closed in upon him. 'In point of fact,' he went on, growing red and stammering worse than ever, 'we both admired you all for it immensely.'

'And so?' Sacha said interrogatively.

'And so——' Mr. Gardener went on, looking at his friend for assistance. 'Now then, you help me out, Henley!'

Mr. Stokes, thus dragged into it, grew red in the face in turn, and responded in his place:

'Well, Trevor said to me, "It's a shame, if these ladies want to start a new household on rational principles like that, they should have to do all the rough work of the house themselves, isn't it, Henley?" And I said: "So it seems. It's not woman's place to bear the brunt of hard work. I wonder what they'd say, now, if you and I were to step round and assure them of our—well, our sympathy with them in this new departure, and ask 'em if they'd allow us to call in every morning—before they got up, don't you know—without necessarily meeting them or knowing them socially at all—just to light the fires, and clean the grates, and black the boots, and polish the knives, and all that sort of thing." And

Trevor said, "Capital!" And so we decided we'd ask. And now—well, now, if you please, we've come round to ask you.'

Sacha looked at Ionê. Ionê looked at Sacha. Blackbird looked at both. And then all three together burst out laughing unanimously.

That laugh saved the fort.

Owen joined in, and so did the young men, who really seemed, after all, like very good fellows. They laughed for twenty seconds without answering a word.

Then Sacha mustered up gravity enough to say, with a little burst:

'But, you see, we don't know you!'

'Oh, we're very respectable,' Mr. Gardener put in, gazing down at his gardenia. 'In fact, that's just it; we're a great deal too respectable. This monotony palls. And we thought it so brave of you to attempt an innovation. We can give excellent references, too, you know—in the City or elsewhere. My friend's an Oxford man; I'm a partner myself in Wilson, Gardener, and Isenberger—ver ll-known house, Eve's Court, Old Broad Street.'

And he folded one gloved hand somewhat beseechingly over the other.

'But cracking the coal, you know?' Ionê suggested, with a merry twinkle. 'You couldn't do that, now, could you, with those light kid gloves on?'

Mr. Gardener began hastily to remove one of the incriminating articles with little nervous tugs.

'Oh, they come off, you know,' he answered, with a still deeper blush. 'They don't grow there, of course. They're mere separable accidents. And, besides, we're so anxious to help. And we know Mr. Braithwaite. We can get letters of introduction—ch, just dozens of them, if you want them.'

'But we thought it best,' Mr. Stokes interposed, 'to call at once, and strike while the iron was hot; for we were afraid—well, like the fellow at the pool of Siloam, don't you know: while we waited, some other might step in before us.'

Sacha was practical. She was also not too afraid of saying what she felt.

'The best thing,' she suggested, after a moment's reflection, looking the facts in the face, 'would be for you both to stop to tea and help us get it. Then we might see how far you're likely to suit the place, and whether we can avail ourselves or not of your very kind offer.'

'That's capital!' Mr. Henley Stokes replied, looking across at his friend, and peeling his gloves off instantly. 'If you try us, I'm sure you'll find we're not such a bad sort, after all—not such duffers as we look. We're handy men about a house. And we're tired of being no use in the world to anybody anywhere.'

And, indeed, before tea was over and dinner well cooked, the two young men had succeeded in making themselves so useful, so agreeable, and so ornamental as well, that even Owen's first prejudice died away by degrees, and he voted them both very decent fellows.

Ionê remarked in an audible aside that they were bricks; and Sacha declared with candour they could do more than she fancied.

In the end, it was unanimously agreed the community should accept their proffered services for the present, and during good behaviour, and that they might begin if they liked by lighting the fires and blacking the boots at half-past six next morning.

'Hooray, Trev!' Mr. Stokes exclaimed in a tone of triumph, looking across at his friend. 'This is something like progress! This is better than stockbroking.'

'I'm sure we're very much obliged to you indeed,' Mr. Gardener added, with a cheerful glance at a coal mark on his otherwise spotless cuff. 'And to show you we've no intention of intruding upon you in any way beyond what's strictly necessary in the way of business'—he took up his hat as he spoke—'we'll now bid you good-evening.'

CHAPTER XV.

AN INVITATION.

In a week or two it was clear to the members of the phalanstery the young men with the frockcoats were an unmitigated success. 'Our Boys,' as Ionê called them, turned out trumps in every way. In spite of their kid gloves and their buttonhole bouquets, they weren't afraid of hard work, but buckled to with a will at the rough jobs of the household. As a rule, indeed, the joint mistresses of the flat saw little or nothing of their amateur manservants. They went to bed at night, leaving the ashes in the grates, and their shoes at their doors, and woke in the morning to find everything cleared up, the rooms well warmed, and the house swept and garnished as if by friendly fairies. To be sure, this arrangement necessitated the entrusting of a latch-key to Mr. Gardener, the head-servant of the two—a step as to the wisdom and desirability of which Sacha at first somewhat hesitated. But the young men were so modest, so good-natured, so unobtrusive, and so kindly withal, that they very soon felt sure they were perfectly trustworthy. As Blackbird remarked, they were too simple-hearted to make it worth while sticking at conventions on their account. Mrs. Grundy was not evolved for such as they were.

Still, though the girls saw 'Our Boys' but at rare intervals, when those willing slaves loitered late over the fires, or when the locks got out of order, or when the windows wanted cleaning, common gratitude compelled them from time to time to ask their benefactors in to afternoon tea, that mildest and most genial of London entertainments. The young men themselves, to be sure, protested with fervour that such politenesses were unnecessary; it was for the sake of the principle they came, they said, not for the sake of the persons. Yet from a very early period of their acquaintance Sacha fancied she noticed Mr. Henley Stokes betrayed a distinct liking for Blackbird's society; while Mr. Gardener, with the gar-

denia (a point of honour to the last), paid particular attention, she observed, if not to herself, at least to her pictures. A nice, honest young man, Mr. Gardener, at least, and as unlike as possible to Sacha's preconceived idea of the eternal and absolute typical stockbroker.

So she said to herself, indeed, one day, when from the recesses of Mr. Gardener's light overcoat, hung up in the hall, there tumbled by accident a small russia-leather-bound volume. Mr. Gardener, with a blush, tried to pick it up unobserved and smuggle it back into its place again; but Sacha's eye was too quick for him. She read in a moment the gilt lettering on the back.

'Why, it's poetry!' she exclaimed in surprise. 'It's Keats! What do you do with him?'

Mr. Gardener stammered like a schoolboy discovered in the flagrant crime of concealing a crib.

'I—er—I read him,' he answered, after a brief pause, with much obvious confusion.

'In the City?' Sacha asked, smiling.

Mr. Gardener plucked up courage at her smile to confess the shameful truth.

'Well, a stockbroker, you know,' he said, 'has so much time hanging idle on his hands when there's nothing going on in his office, and it's such an unsatisfactory sort of trade at the best, and you feel it does you no good either spiritually or physically, or anybody else, either, for the matter of that; so in the intervals of my work I try—er—I try to develop, as far as I can, my own higher nature. And in the mornings I come here to light the fires and all that; and in the evenings I go down to my boys and girls at Stepney.'

'What's that?' Sacha asked quickly, catching the hint at once. 'I haven't heard about them yet.'

Mr. Gardener looked modest again.

'Oh, a fellow must do something, you know,' he said, 'just to justify his existence. And as I'm well off, and strong and healthy and all that, and society does so much for me, I feel bound in return to give a helping hand with these poor East-End people of mine, both in the way of organization and in the way of amusement.'

Sacha looked at him with some admiration. There

was a sturdy honesty of purpose about this modest young man that touched her Russian heart to the core. And she liked his reading Keats, too; it was a point in his favour. For he wasn't the least bit namby-pamby with it all, in spite of his blushes and his light kid gloves. She could see when he talked about his gymnasium at Stepney, a few days later, that he was a tolerable athlete; and he cleaned grates and split coal like no working man in London. When he proposed to Ionê that she and Sacha and Blackbird should come down to his hall at Stepney one evening to teach his lads to dance, they were all delighted; and when they went there, and found themselves among these rough East-End young men, Ionê, at least, thought it as jolly good fun as any Belgravia ball-room.

'You see, miss,' her first partner explained to her, in a confidential undertone, 'we chaps learns this sort o' thing a sight better from a lady than from our own young women. Ladies doesn't larf at us; and a chap don't like to be larfed at. Our own gals, they calls us "Now then, clumsy," and all such sort o' names. But a lady's more patient-like. You shows us the steps, and we can pay more attention then, coz we knows you ain't a-larfing at us.'

'There's nothing to laugh at,' Ionê answered gravely, surveying her stalwart young costermonger with not unapproving eyes. 'We all have to begin. I had to begin myself once. And as for laughing, you should have seen how the people laughed at me over yonder in Morocco when first I dressed up in Moorish costume, like my picture in the paper there, and tried to ride as a man does! I laughed at myself, for that matter, till I thought I should never catch my breath again.'

And she smiled at him so sweetly that that young costermonger went home perfectly sober that night, and talked to his 'gal' about the faces of the angels in heaven, which naturally made his young woman jealous, for she knew at once where the unwonted suggestion had come from.

So for four or five weeks events at the flat went on

smoothly enough, and Trevor Gardener and Henley Stokes grew gradually on the footing of friends of the family. They even ventured to drop in of an evening, when Sacha's work was done, and Ionê had washed up the dinner-things, to accompany Blackbird in one of her own plaintive songs, or to read Austin Dobson and Lang to the assembled household. They introduced Hope indeed to the 'Ballade of Sleep'; and the poor girl spent at least a dozen wakeful nights in composing apt music between the clanging hours for that congenial dirge of dead and buried slumber.

At the end of that time, however, an event occurred which stirred the deep heart of the flat to its profoundest recesses. Owen came up one day from Moor Hill, glad of so good an excuse, with a letter from Lady Beaumont, just received by post at the Red Cottage.

So gracious a letter from the county member's wife set them all wondering what on earth the great lady could want with them.

'My dear Mr. Cazalet,' it began ('Quite affectionate,' Ionê said, shaking out her chestnut locks round her head) —'My dear Mr. Cazalet, Sir Arthur wishes me very particularly to write and ask you whether you could come up to my At Home on Wednesday next, for which I enclose a card for you and your dear sister. We expect Lord Caistor; and as I know your desire to enter the diplomatic service, it can do no harm to make his acquaintance beforehand. Several of our artistic friends are so anxious to meet Sacha, too; and that, as you know, may be of use to her in future. One should always make friends of the Mammon of Unrighteousness as represented on the Hanging Committee. And if you *could* persuade her two companions, Miss Dracopoli and Miss Braithwaite, to come with you both, we should be so *very* much obliged to you. Many of our young men want so much to know them. Apologize for me to Sacha; I would have written to her direct, but I don't know the address of this famous joint-stock flat of hers that everybody's talking about. It's made quite a sensa-

tion among the advanced woman's rights women. They say it marks an epoch.

'In breathless haste,

'Yours very sincerely,

'ANASTASIA BEAUMONT.'

'She wants to lionize us,' Ionê cried, looking up with her very unleonine soft round face, 'and I refuse to be lionized!'

'I never *will* sing in houses where I'm asked on purpose,' little Blackbird said wearily. 'It's a rudeness to ask one just for what they think they can get out of one.'

'But what a clever woman of the world she is!' Sacha put in, with a wise smile. 'She doesn't say a word about what she wants herself, but what she thinks will attract us on the ground of our own interest. Lord Caistor for Owen, possible patrons for me, admiration for you two—it's really very sharp of her.'

'For my part,' Owen interposed, with a side glance at Ionê in her dainty girlish beauty, 'I think what they want is, first, the girl who rode through Morocco alone, and, second, to be polite to a possible future constituent.'

'The question is, shall we go?' Sacha asked, always practical. 'Apart altogether from their motives, is it worth our while to accept, or isn't it?'

'Will *you* go?' Ionê asked, turning point-blank to Owen.

Owen felt his heart throb. Oh, Mr. Hayward, Mr. Hayward, this girl will be too much for you!

'Yes, I think so,' he said slowly, 'to see Lord Caistor.'

'Then I think I'll go, too,' Ionê answered, with a burst. 'After all, it'll be fun, and I love these big crushes. You always find somebody you can shock in them somewhere. If I was to go in my Moorish costume, now—just fancy what a success! How Lady Beaumont would bless me! It'd be in all the papers.'

Owen's heart beat higher still. He knew Ionê wanted to go because *he* would take her. And it made him feel so happy—and so very, very miserable. What would

Mr. Hayward say if only he knew? But is *this* the metal of which to mould a revolutionist?

For to Owen the Cause was a very real and a very sacred thing. And he was imperilling its future, he knew but too well—for the sake of a woman.

They talked much that afternoon, and hazarded many guesses as to why Lady Beaumont had bidden them all to her At Home. But not one of them came anywhere near the real reason of her invitation. For the truth was that Madame Mireff had said, in the most casual way, though with a sudden magnetic glance of those great luminous eyes of hers, 'I wish, Anastasia, you'd ask that Sacha Somebody when you have me next at your house. Her name puzzles me so much. I want to hunt her up. I must get to the bottom of it.'

CHAPTER XVI.

AT LADY BEAUMONT'S.

'You've heard of Prince Ruric Brassoff,' Sir Arthur was half whispering to a thin little lady by his side as Sacha wedged her way into an unobtrusive corner, 'the famous leader of the Nihilists? You remember; five hundred thousand roubles set upon his head. Well, they say she's in England now on purpose to ferret him.'

'And if she found him?' the thin little lady suggested in reply; 'she couldn't do anything to him here.'

Sir Arthur shrugged his shoulders. It was a foreign trick he'd picked up in Vienna when he was a military *attaché*.

'Not openly,' he answered, with a dry little laugh. 'But poison, perhaps; or a knife—these Russians are so unscrupulous.'

Sacha's calm eyes flashed fire; for she could remember Petersburg still, and her martyred father. But she followed the direction which both their glances took, and she saw a large-built woman with very fully-developed charms, who was talking with great animation and wide-

open eyes to Lord Caistor by the mantelpiece. Sacha had never seen the Cabinet Minister before, to be sure, but she recognised him at once from the caricatures in *Punch* and the photographs in the shop-windows. Or, at least, if not the famous man himself, at any rate his still more famous eyeglass. As for the lady who was chattering with him, a flash of intuition told her somehow, by the aid of Sir Arthur's words, it could be none other than Madame Mireff, the Russian spy or unaccredited agent, currently believed to exert so curious an influence on Lord Caistor himself, and on that mysterious entity, his foreign policy.

'The Prince is very rich, isn't he?' the thin little lady by Sir Arthur's side asked curiously.

'Was!' Sir Arthur corrected. 'He had millions at one time. But he flung away half his fortune on the Cause years and years ago; and the other half the Government very wisely seized and employed in suppressing it.'

'And is he known to be in England at all?' the thin little lady went on, looking sideways at the presumed Madame Mireff.

Sir Arthur shrugged his shoulders again.

'How should I know?' he answered, with a laugh. 'Quien sabe? Quien sabe? Prince Ruric Brassoff takes jolly good care, you may be sure, to keep well out of the way. He works like a mole underground. I'm told, indeed, it's fifteen years since his own Nihilist friends even have ever set eyes on him.'

'Then, how do they know he's alive?' the lady asked, with languid interest.

'Ah, that's just the odd part of it,' Sir Arthur replied, still gazing across at the stranger with his big speaking eyes. 'They say, though nobody ever sees him, he's still the active head of all the party in Western Europe, and the Russian Government has constantly of late years intercepted letters and documents signed in his handwriting. But if he's to be found at all, you may be perfectly sure Madame Mireff will find him. She's keen as a bloodhound, persistent as a beagle. She's clever enough for anything.'

Sacha rose and moved unobtrusively across the room

to Owen, who was standing with Ionê near the doorway, in the opposite corner. She had just time to murmur low to him in Russian:

'Owen, beware of the woman who's talking there to Lord Caistor. She's a spy of the Czar's. She's come over here to look for some Nihilist refugee.'

And even as these words escaped her lips, Lady Beaumont sidled across to her.

'Oh, Sacha, my child,' she said, quite affectionately, taking her hand with much warmth, like a good society hostess, 'I'm so glad you've come. There's a friend of mine here who's just dying to know you. And you have brought Miss Dracopoli, too, I see. I recognise you, Miss Dracopoli, by your likeness in the *Graphic*. How good of you to come round to my little gathering! I know you're so much engaged—everybody fighting for you just at present, of course—the tail end of the season! Come over this way with me, and I'll introduce you to Lord Caistor. And you must come too, Owen. Madame Mireff—one moment—excuse my interrupting you. This is the clever young artist whose picture you admired so much at the Academy the other day—Miss Cazalet, Mr. Cazalet.'

Owen bowed low with an awkward feeling of unwonted restraint. Never before in his life had he stood face to face with an avowed enemy of the Cause—one of the bureaucratic ring—and he felt at once the novelty and difficulty of the position. As for Sacha, she held herself very erect and proud, hardly nodding her head; but her breath came and went, and her face flushed crimson.

'I'm glad—my work—interested you,' she said, with an evident effort.

She'd have given millions to get away; the strain and stress of it was horrible.

But Madame Mireff only beamed upon her with those famous soft eyes, and said, with real kindness of tone:

'Yes, it was beautiful—beautiful. I picked it out at once from all the pictures in the room. It had soul in it—soul in it. It went straight to my Russian heart; for you know Miss Cazalet, I'm before all things a Russian, and everything about Russia always thrills me to the

finger-tips. We Slavs feel the magic of our common Slavonic ancestry far more, I believe, than any Western people. Russia holds us by some spell. Cela nous entraine. Cela nous fascine.'

Owen opened his eyes wide at this unexpected profession of faith—the enthusiasm with which Madame spoke reminded him so exactly of Mr. Hayward's own in his moments of deepest patriotic fervour. Was it possible, then, that these bureaucrats even—the despots, the enemy—shared that same unquenchable Slavonic zeal that burned bright like a fire in the friends of the Cause—the lovers of their country?

But Sacha only answered coldly, in her very driest voice:

'I fail to perceive the connection you draw between my picture and Russia.'

Madame glanced back at her, all motherliness, with kind melting eyes, in spite of this first rebuff. Her glance was mesmeric.

'Why, surely,' she said, exerting every spell she knew, 'the spirit at least—the spirit is pure Russian. I cried out to Lady Beaumont the moment I saw it, "There's Slav in that canvas!" and Lady Beaumont answered me, "Oh, that's Sacha Cazalet's picture." So when I heard your name was Sacha, of course I took it for granted at once that your mother at least must have been more or less of a Russian.'

'You're mistaken,' Sacha replied, in the same hard, dry tone. 'My mother, on the contrary, was a pure-blooded Englishwoman.'

'Your father, then?' Madame suggested quickly.

Sacha parried the blow at once.

'Really,' she said, 'I don't admit my genealogical tree has anything at all to do with my pictures.'

Madame left the false track sharply with a diplomatist's instinct.

'Well, the painting's a lovely one, at any rate,' she said sweetly, 'and the qualities in it that struck me as Slavonic are at least qualities of high idealism and profound moral truth. Whatever race inspires them, one surely can't help admiring those, Miss Cazalet. There's

a freedom, a gracefulness, a vitality, an unconventionality, about the lithe figures of your beautiful classical girls that took my fancy immensely. And Aspasia herself—in the centre—what a soulful conception! So vivid and intense! Like our best Russian girls nowadays: free as the air, keen as the wind, fresh as the morning dew, yet capable, one could feel, of yielding her life like water for any good cause that in after-days might demand it.'

Owen listened astonished.

The voice was the same, though the words were so different. Was this the true Russian note, then? *La vie pour le Tsar*, or *Death for Freedom?*

Madame drew a vacant chair to her side, and motioned Sacha into it.

Against her will, as if drawn by some spell, Sacha sat down, burning inwardly.

Owen stood by in his big manliness, and bent over them, listening.

Then Madame began laying herself out as only a trained diplomatist and woman of the world could have done to make a conquest of Sacha. By slow degrees she led round the conversation to Sacha's art and her friends. She discussed Ionê with Owen, praising her beauty enthusiastically; she discussed Burne-Jones with Sacha, finding something in common between the profounder Celtic and Slavonic temperaments.

Gradually, bit by bit, even Sacha gave way. She admitted the fascination of the woman who had talked over Lord Caistor and changed a foreign policy. Her conversation was so easy, so alluring, so *simpatica*.

As for Owen, he bent over her, entranced, feeling the nameless attraction to a lad of a ripe woman of the world, ready and willing to deploy all her manifold charms of body and mind in one serried phalanx for his momentary captivation.

Ionê glanced across once or twice from her artlessly girlish self-revelation to that amused Lord Caistor, and felt her heart give a jump of doubt and fear within her. That horrid great Russian woman with the big, staring eyes was surely too much for any lad of twenty.

What struck Owen more and more, however, the more freely Madame talked, was the absolute identity (in fibre) of her Russian enthusiasm with Mr. Hayward's. Though the Russia of which she spoke was the Russia of the tyrants, yet the devotion with which she spoke of it was the devotion of the patriots. It was Czar and Empress against Land and People. For the first time in his life it dawned upon Owen faintly that what he had here to deal with was in essence a temperament. Madame Mireff and Mr. Hayward saw the opposite sides of the same shield, according to their different points of view, but were both equally vehement and intense in the idea they formed of it. That's Russia all over. Your Slav is, above all things, a dreamer and an enthusiast.

At last, after much long and cleverly-guided discourse, Madame had succeeded in making even Sacha herself admit grudgingly in her own mind that the Czar's spy, in her private capacity at any rate, was an extremely agreeable, nay, well-meaning person. She had a rare gift of insinuating herself into your confidence, somehow; of taking such a deep interest in your mind and your feelings, that you couldn't help warming up in the end into some responsive expansiveness. Then, suddenly, in the midst of her easy-going talk, Madame turned round to her and fixed her with her glittering eye.

'In fact,' she said, pouncing upon her with a strange foreign tongue, 'as our Russian proverb puts it, "The smooth-worn stone on the river's bed can never understand why the pebbles on the bank find the sun's heat unpleasant."'

She said it in Russian, as if she expected to be understood; and even as she uttered the words, she fixed her piercing glance, full of inquiry, on Sacha's face. Owen bent over, still more attentive, wondering whether, thus attacked by so unexpected a flank movement, Sacha—that calm, imperturbable Sacha—would be taken off her guard or not. But the phlegmatic Slavonic temperament, almost Oriental in its passivity, stood her there in good stead. Sacha never moved a muscle of her quiet face, or changed colour for a second.

'What does that mean?' she asked languidly. 'Will

you kindly translate for us? As yet, thank heaven, Russian isn't added to German and French as a necessary part of an English girl's education.'

Madame's keen eye still rested on her like a hawk's. She translated it—wrong.

'"The polar bear wonders the grizzly should think his climate cold,"' she answered, with a bland smile of child-like innocence.

But even so, Sacha gave no sign. Just the faintest tinge of a contemptuous curl at the corner of her mouth alone betrayed, if at all, her consciousness of the attempted deception.

'Very true,' she said calmly. 'We can only sympathize to the full with the troubles and joys we've ourselves experienced.'

Madame gave it up again for the present. This girl was too deep for her. It was only at the end of the evening, after talking to many of her willing slaves meanwhile, that the unaccredited agent returned to the Cazalets with a charming smile and an outstretched hand.

'Well, good-night,' she said. '*Au revoir*, that is—for I must meet you again. You remind me so of dear friends—dear friends of mine in Russia. And your brother—when I saw him it gave me quite a little start. . . . He's so extraordinarily like poor Sergius Selistoff, of Petersburg.'

It was a sharp home-thrust—their own father's name! —but Owen hoped he'd avoided it. He blushed and bowed. A young man may fairly blush when his personal appearance is under discussion.

'*Au revoir*, then,' he said, as frankly and unconcernedly as he was able. 'It's so kind of you to put it so.'

As they went home to the flat in the cab, an unwonted silence oppressed Ionê. She said nothing for a long time; then at last she observed, with much seeming *insouciance*:

'What a talk you had, Owen, with that fat Madame Mireff! She's handsome, too, isn't she—even now. Must have been beautiful when she was young! And what eyes she made at you, and how she stuck to you like a

leech! It's a great thing to be six feet two—in Russia—apparently!'

But at that self-same moment, Lady Beaumont, wearied out with the duties of her post, was saying, with a yawn, to her friend in the empty drawing-room:

'Well, Olga, I hope you found out what you wanted.'

And Madame Mireff made answer:

'Part, at least; not quite all. That is to say, not for certain. They're Russian, of course, as Russian as they can stand; but whether they're the particular people I imagine or not, I don't feel quite sure just yet. I must make further inquiries.'

'You won't get them sent to Siberia, I trust,' Lady Beaumont said, half seriously; for she rather liked that big, handsome Owen.

Madame drew back a step and surveyed her from head to foot with a sort of innocent surprise.

'Siberia!' she repeated. 'Siberia! Oh dear, that odious calumny! That ridiculous misconception! Must I explain it every day? Will you never understand us? Siberia is to Russia what Botany Bay was once to England. We send our criminals there. It's a penal settlement, not a Bastille nor place of exile for political offenders. But you English will never give us credit for anything of that sort—never, never, never! That's your thick-headed Teutonism, my dear. The French have more *esprit*. They see through all that *blague*. I assure you, Anastasia, I might just as well ask you not to let Lord Caistor send me, without reason assigned, to Pentonville or to Portland.'

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE COURSE OF BUSINESS.

Mr. Hayward smiled inwardly when, a day or two later, he received a formal note, couched in the third person, stating that Madame Mireff would be much obliged if Messrs. Mortimer and Co. would kindly appoint an hour between eleven and one o'clock on Monday next, for her

to sit for her photograph. What an amusing *rencontre*, to be sure, between those two in such a relation! It would interest him to watch how Madame was doing her work, and what presence of mind she might display under peculiar circumstances.

He had heard, of course, from Owen of Madame's meeting with the Cazalets at Lady Beaumont's; and his first remark to his young friend, when Owen mentioned their interview, was a fervent exclamation:

'I hope you didn't betray any repugnance to her at first sight, as one of the tyrant's instruments? That's immensely important. You must learn above all things, Owen, when you come to mix with that hateful world, to suppress all overt signs of the repulsion it begets in you.'

'I don't think I did, Mr. Hayward,' Owen answered truthfully. 'In fact, I rather flatter myself I managed to keep my feelings perfectly under control. My face was a mask. And besides, she talked so nicely, and seemed in many ways so Russian, that to some extent, after a time —it may have been very wrong, but do you know, I almost liked her.'

Mr. Hayward's brow darkened a little. This was bad hearing in its way. Had he succumbed so readily?

'She's a very insinuating woman,' he murmured in reply; 'and on that account the more dangerous. Remember always in this world the influence of women is a thing every noble cause has to fight against strenuously. I don't say they're always banded against every good thing; our own society has received some of its greatest aids from the devotion, the heroism, the self-sacrifice of women. In their place, they count for much. But still, they're a disturbing element in many ways, Owen—a disturbing element. Often they undermine principles that nothing else on earth could conceivably undermine. You know, my boy, I don't mean to preach to you; I was never a humbug; and, as always, I prefer to let your individuality have free play for itself. But if ever you see anything more of Madame Olga Mireff, I would say to you as a friend, regarding you now as a fellow-worker and enthusiast for the Cause, my advice is just this: Keep

clear of entanglements, were it for practice' sake only. Don't begin letting women twist you once round their fingers. The habit of yielding to them grows with indulgence: it's instinctive in our virility from Adam downwards. Even Samson gave way, and his story's a parable of the Strong Man for all time. What no force can overcome, no hostile power destroy, a woman's will can get over all too easily. . . . And now, are you going back this afternoon to the Red Cottage?'

Owen blushed as he answered, with transparent truthfulness:

'Yes; but I'm going first to take tea at the flat with Ionê and Sacha.'

Mr. Hayward held his peace. That ill was too deep for words, a harm no preacher could heal. He could only hope and wish Owen might be delivered from so great a temptation. After all, individualism must have the fullest scope. We can but guide and direct.

'And we Nihilists at least,' he thought to himself with a stifled sigh, 'have no ground to go upon if we are not in all things consistent individualists.'

So, at the appointed hour, when Madame Mireff was to visit the studio, Mr. Hayward, already divining the cause of her visit, and too confident of his own strength not to disdain weak subterfuges, made the running easy for her by setting out on his table three or four of his Morocco views, with Owen conspicuously posed as an accessory in the foreground.

Madame Mireff arrived to the minute, and was shown up at once, viâ the lift, to the upper chamber, very high and glass-roofed, where Mr. Hayward presided over the mysteries of his art, as Mortimer and Co., of Bond Street.

They took a good stare at one another, those two, as a preliminary investigation, each noting many small points in the other's external characteristics, before either spoke. Then Madame Mireff said sharply;

'Are you Mr. Mortimer himself? because I want this photograph to be particularly good; and if it's a success you can expose copies of it for sale in the shop-windows.'

She was enough of a celebrity to venture upon that

bribe. All London was talking just then of the beautiful, cunning Russian and her mysterious influence over Lord Caistor's policy.

Mr. Hayward smiled a quiet smile of superior knowledge as he answered, with something of his grand society manner;

'I'm the nearest approach to Mr. Mortimer that exists. I'm the head of the firm; but it's a trade name only. There's no Mortimer now in the concern at all. My name is Lambert Hayward. I'll take your portrait myself, if you'll be good enough to sit down there,' waving her with one lordly sweep of his left hand into a vacant chair. 'And, what's more, it'll be taken just fifty times better than any other photographer in London can take it.'

Even Madame Mireff was half over-awed by the imposing dignity of his presence. Such an operator as this she had never before seen. She seated herself passively in the chair, and let him pose her as he would with his stately courtesy. Mr. Hayward arranged her hands and her draperies with self-respecting deference, as a court-painter of noble birth might arrange the attire of an empress who was sitting to him.

'Now, a thought more to the left,' he said at last, drawing a screen on the glazed roof over her head, so as to let a pensive light fall delicately on that too exuberant bust—for he had a true artist's eye for effects of light; 'look about here; that will do! ah, so—exactly. I'm venturing to pose you now, first as Madame Mireff the diplomatist, the *dame de la haut politique*, the friend and ally of ambassadors. You look it to perfection. After that I'll try to catch you as Madame Mireff, the leader of gay society in Petersburg; and then as Madame Mireff, the dreamer, the enthusiast.'

At the last words Madame's expression altered slightly—and, quick as lightning, Mr. Hayward withdrew the cap and then shortly replaced it again.

'That was just what I wanted,' he said, a little triumphant; 'that *intriguée* expression, as of one searching in spirit the explanation of an enigma. It's so you must look, Madame, when you play the high game of diplomacy

with our guileless English statesmen—keen to detect their weak points, quick to scent the approach of any dangerous topic. That's why I said to you just then the word "enthusiast." It was to make you wonder how a photographer in a Bond Street shop ever came to suspect such a trait in your complex character.'

Madame looked up this time in naïve surprise. The assistant meanwhile had slipped in another plate.

'There, so,' Mr. Hayward cried again, lifting one warning little finger. 'Don't alter a muscle—a thought! Don't stir, please, or change expression! Ah, capital! capital! That's the bland, childlike smile of the perfect hostess. It's as you must have looked in the Governor's palace at Tiflis. Now again, please. Head thrown back a little more. Eyes looking up—yes, there! Less of the figure this time! More of the face and the neck! Think of Russia and the cause you have nearest at heart in your country. Think of the Slavonic enthusiasm of your earliest dreams! Think of your Czar, of your Empress! Forget yourself—and me—and this murky London! Go back to Petersburg in your own soul—to Moscow—to Novgorod!'

Madame sighed half involuntarily. What did *he* know of the cause she loved really best? And if he knew, what would he think of it, that cold, unsympathetic Englishman? The thought reflected itself in her face, and, like an electric flash, Mr. Hayward fixed it. He replaced the cap with the sense of a work well performed.

'There, we have the three Madame Mireffs,' he said, stepping back and releasing her; 'politician, *grande dame*, self-effacing patriot. And all, as you see, in rather less than ten minutes!'

Madame let her breath go free after the suspense of the sitting. What a curious man he was, to be sure, this photographer! Even *she* felt half afraid now to tackle him about Sacha and Owen. He seemed to see through her so—touched such chords so easily! She talked for a minute or two with him on neutral subjects; then in a casual way she moved over to the table. As her eye fell on Owen in the Atlas group she gave an almost imperceptible start, but Mr. Hayward noted it—noted, too,

that she should have been proof against such betrayal of her feelings—and remembered it afterwards.

'Why, that's young Cazalet!' she cried, drawing back. 'Owen Cazalet! I know him.'

'Madame knows everybody,' Mr. Hayward answered, smiling. 'Owen Cazalet's a young friend of mine. He went with me to Morocco.'

Madame gazed hard at the portrait. It was admirably characteristic. Slav, Slav to the backbone. Then she ventured to play a bold card.

'He reminds me of an old friend of mine,' she said slowly, as she looked at it. 'In Petersburg, long ago. The same eyes. The same big build. The same open expression. He might almost be a son of Count Sergius Selistoff's.'

'You think so?'

Those cold eyes were fixed coldly upon her.

Madame Mireff flinched.

'Yes, very like him,' she answered, musing.

There was a long, deep pause. Then Madame looked up with engaging frankness, and asked as innocently as a child:

'Is he Russian by origin?'

Mr. Hayward stroked his chin and regarded her in silence. At last he went off at a tangent:

'I've travelled a bit in Europe,' he said, 'and I know my way about the Continent. I've visited Petersburg. I remember the name you mention. There's a General *Alexis* Selistoff there—a head of the Third Section. . . . I suppose you know him. . . . No doubt this Count Sergius Selistoff was the General's brother. . . .' He paused a moment. Then he broke in upon her fiercely, with a sudden lowering of his head between his shoulders and a quick clenching of his fists. 'And do you think, *Madame l'Espionne*,' he cried, in a low voice between his teeth, 'if these were really Sergius Selistoff's children, I'd give up the fact to an emissary of the Czar's and a creature of their uncle's at the Third Section?'

Madame Mireff drew back, wholly abashed. She was a woman, after all, and tears rose quick into her eyes.

'You English will believe any evil on earth of a Russian,' she murmured low, half remorsefully.

'Then, you mean them no harm?' Mr. Hayward said, drawing back and scanning her close from head to foot.

'Heaven help me, no!' Madame faltered, losing her presence of mind for a moment at this unexpected attack. She seemed to hesitate one instant; and Mr. Hayward noticed her hesitation with a disapproving eye. 'It's so hard,' she gasped out slowly at last, 'to be always misunderstood. The girl herself—Sacha they call her—misunderstood me the other day. It's painful when one really wishes to do anyone good——' She broke off with a half-scared look. 'Oh, we women are too weak!' she cried in genuine distress. 'Too weak for our work. Too weak for such employment.'

'I think so,' Mr. Hayward assented, with a cold, half-contemptuous sneer. 'Olga Mireff, you are tried in the balance and found wanting. This is not what one would expect from Nicolas Sergueyeff's daughter!'

Madame started again, still more visibly. She was completely unnerved now. She clasped her hands in her astonishment.

'Why, what do you know of my father?' she exclaimed, all aghast at such omniscience.

Mr. Hayward came close to her, seized her wrist in his hand, and addressed her in Russian.

'Olga Mireff,' he said, looking hard at her, 'you've been a useful friend of the Cause; but you've lost your head to-day. This is dangerous, very. Make no more inquiries at present about these young Cazalets, I tell you. You had no orders to meddle with the matter from headquarters, and this is a headquarters affair. You've ventured to push yourself in where you were not needed, and you must abide the result. This interview between us shall be reported at once to Ruric Brassoff.'

At that name Madame Mireff gasped for breath.

'Ruric Brassoff!' she repeated, appalled. 'Then, you're one of us?' in Russian.

For it was even so. The dear friend of the Czar, the trusted tool of General Selistoff, the unaccredited envoy to the English Cabinet—was herself a Nihilist. And it

was for the sake of the good she could do the Cause that she consented to play in outward show the hateful game of the tyrant's diplomatist.

But Mr. Hayward only gazed back at her with unaffected scorn.

'And you think me as weak as yourself, then!' he answered. 'You think I wear my heart on my sleeve! You think I'll bare my bosom to the first person that asks me! Olga Mireff, this is bad. You hold your cards ill to expose their faces. You must answer for all this to Ruric Brassoff.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE NIHILIST CHIEF.

It was with profound trepidation that Madame Mireff opened next morning, in her luxurious rooms at the Métropole, a letter with a penny stamp on it, bearing the a ling postmark. For the address on the envelope she saw at a glance was in the handwriting of Ruric Brassoff's secretary, and she felt sure the mysterious photographer in Bond Street must already have related her indiscretions of yesterday to the head of the organization. And Ruric Brassoff himself, as every Nihilist knew well, was not a man to be trifled with.

'Olga Mireff,' the letter said shortly in Russian, 'I learn from a faithful friend that your conduct of late has seriously imperilled several schemes for the good of the cause which I have much at heart; and I feel so convinced of the paramount necessity for explaining to you the evil tendency of your inconsiderate action that I have determined to make an exception to my general rule, and to grant you at last—what you have so long desired—a personal interview. Call on Saturday next, at four precisely, at the same place where you spoke with a brother of ours to-day, and ask to see Mr. Hayward, who will conduct you to my presence.

'Yours for Russia,

'Ruric Brassoff.'

And this was Tuesday! Oh, cruel, cruel delay! Had Ruric Brassoff, she wondered, arranged it so on purpose? Good subordinate as she was, and duly trained to obedience, Madame Mireff said many hard things in her own heart meanwhile about that inexorable chief, who had given her four such days of suspense and misery. She had longed to meet him again for years, and now—why, now she dreaded it. How difficult it was even to pretend to listen with interest to Lord Caistor's long-winded anecdotes of the turf, or Lady Beaumont's vapid society stories, with that appalling interview hanging over her head all the while like the sword of Damocles! How difficult to dine out, and smile, and smirk, and sparkle, and fascinate, with the letter at her heart and blank terror in her soul! Oh, remorseless chief! Oh, pitiless organization!

At last, however, the dreadful Saturday came, and, with what resolve she could muster up, Madame Mireff drove round in her comfortable brougham to Mortimer and Co.'s in Bond Street. 'To see Mr. Hayward,' she said shortly, without another word, to the frizzy-haired young woman in waiting in the office, and she was ushered at once into the photographer's presence.

'What do you wish?' Mr. Hayward asked, rising and bowing, polite and inscrutable and courtly as ever.

Madame thought of her instructions, and answered to the letter:

'I was told to ask for Mr. Hayward.'

The photographer smiled.

'Quite right,' he replied more approvingly, in an almost genial tone. 'And Mr. Hayward was to show you to . . . another person.' He changed his expression suddenly as he added in Russian, dropping into it all at once, 'But the two are one. Olga Mireff, don't you know me? I am Ruric Brassoff!'

Madame rose in alarm from the chair where she had seated herself. Her head swam vaguely. Her eyes grew dim. She clapped one hand to her forehead in amaze and bewilderment.

'Is this a trap?' she asked piteously, gazing about her, all unnerved. 'Do you want to take me in? You're not

telling me the truth. I knew the man well. You're *not* Prince Ruric Brassoff.'

'Not the Prince. No, that's true. I ceased to be a prince long ago,' Mr. Hayward answered. 'But Ruric Brassoff—yes, still the same as of old. Look hard, Olga Mireff, and see if you can recognise me!'

Madame Mireff gazed intently at him. Her look was riveted on every part in turn. Then she shook her head.

'Not a trace,' she replied. 'Not a feature—the eyes—perhaps the eyes. But no, impossible, impossible!'

Mr. Hayward seized a pen and wrote a word or two in haste on a sheet of white paper.

'Whose handwriting's that?' he asked, with an air of demonstration. 'And this?' he cried once more, writing another line and handing it to her.

Madame Mireff looked at it, amazed.

'Another man's,' she answered, holding one hand on her heart; 'the same we've always been accustomed to call your secretary's.'

Mr. Hayward put his hand to his mouth, and, fiddling slightly with his fingers, withdrew something hard from the side of the gums. His cheeks fell in a little. He was less round-faced than before.

'Do you recognise any likeness now?' he asked, with a quiver in his voice.

'Hardly any. Well, perhaps—but, there! it's so slight. Oh no, so unlike that handsome Ruric Brassoff of the old days at Petersburg. More stately—severer—grander perhaps—but less beautiful. He was fair. You're dark. He had a beard. You've none. His moustache and hair were light-brown, almost yellow. Yours are black.' And she hesitated.

'Dye, dye—mere dye!' Mr. Hayward mused musically.

'But the features!' Madame Mireff exclaimed, incredulous. 'The voice! No; impossible! A man can't change his profile, his build, his gait, his very tone. You're trying to impose upon me, to lure me to some snare. I can never believe it! You're *not* Ruric Brassoff!'

Mr. Hayward gazed hard at her.

'Have you the letter that brought you here?' he asked very quietly.

Madame pulled it from her bosom.

The Nihilist took it, and shook his head solemnly.

'Wrong, wrong; quite wrong,' he said with a despondent gesture, laying it down by the signature he had just written for comparison. 'Who can work with such tools? You carry *this* about with you! Why, you ought to have burnt it, of course, the moment you'd read it. Suppose you'd been run over by accident in the street, and such a thing had been found upon you!' He crumpled the note and held it up for one minute before his eyes; then he lighted a match and reduced it with the other paper by its side to ashes. She watched it burning. 'Well, you saw,' he went on with a sigh, 'those are the self-same signatures. The letters you've been accustomed to receive —and obey—from Ruric Brassoff, are letters from *me!* That much you can make out with your own eyes, at any rate. And I'm all of Ruric Brassoff that yet remains, though time and privations no doubt have made me thin and lank. There's not enough left of me now for you to recognise, seemingly.'

Madame Mireff stared at him astonished.

'How've you done it?' she asked, wondering. 'I suppose I must believe you're Ruric Brassoff, since you say so; but how on earth have you managed so completely to disguise yourself?'

The Nihilist chief laid his hand on her shoulder with his parental air.

'Listen, Olga Mireff,' he said solemnly. 'You remember what I was—how brought up—in what luxury. No young man of fashion in Petersburg was better dressed than I; no soldier had more successes; no companion was more sought after. I was rich, I was great, I was noble, I was powerful. Well, one day, with a sudden awakening, conscience smote me like a sword. There was a thunderstorm at Petersburg. I came to myself all at once in the midst of the tempest; I realized my own nothingness in this vast teeming universe. I heard, as if with my own ears, the plaintive cry of our Russian peasant; you know that low cry, all stifled wailing and lamentation, in which centuries of serfdom and suffering seem concentrated. His squalid misery touched me—

that great pathetic figure, broken down by toil, exhausted by hunger, worn out with exactions. I awoke to a new life; I felt my heart throb for him, this inarticulate, dumb, tortured thing, who can weep, but cannot speak; this endless crucified sufferer. Then I fell on my face before the Lord, like Paul on the way to Damascus; I took in my heart a solemn oath to consecrate my life, my strength, my thoughts, my energies, to the liberation of that patient, voiceless, manifold people, which drains its life-blood eternally in order that we, the favoured children of privilege and wealth, may live at our ease in great towns, eat, drink, and wive us, and make merry on its sacrifice.'

'I know it,' Madame answered, flushing red in her turn, and clasping her hands hard with emotion. 'I, too—I have felt it.'

'Well, and you know the rest in part,' the ardent Revolutionist went on, with the Slavonic fire in his bosom now burning bright like a lamp. 'How I tore off those gilded clothes, that ate like vitriol into my flesh; how I put on the rough coat and wooden shoes of the peasant; how I wasted my vast fortune like water for the Cause; how I herded with poor wretches, eating their black bread and drinking their poisonous vodki, that I might carry to them the great gospel of our age—the social revolution. What matter to me if the cut-throats of the Government laid hold upon my vile body? What matter to me exile, death, torture, Siberia? You and I shrink not from such sacrifice. We could meet the axe itself with a smile of pure happiness.'

Madame Mireff clenched her hands still harder.

'It is you!' she cried. 'It is you! I followed you from the Court. I recognise there the true voice of Ruric Brassoff.'

Mr. Hayward's voice grew calmer.

'In time, then,' he went on, relapsing once more into his accustomed self, 'I found, as you know, I could serve our great Cause better in the West than in Russia. They stole my fortune, or all that was left of it. I came abroad, and determined no man should ever recognise again the head of the organization. It was painful, but

I did it. You say it's impossible to alter one's profile. Not so! Just a little bit of cartilage removed—see here'—and he took a sketch from a drawer at his side—'there's the Ruric Brassoff you knew long ago at Petersburg. But cut away a mere shade there—under the flesh—a great Paris surgeon. Yes, it was an internal operation, of course, and horribly agonizing—but for the Cause! and I am a Brassoff! A razor to my chin, a little plain black dye, a different cut of the hair, a new twist to the moustache, does all the rest. And see! in a minute'—he added a touch or two with his pencil to the early sketch—'you get me as I am now—Lambert Hayward, photographer, and a naturalized subject of her Britannic Majesty!'

Madame glanced at him in admiration.

'The disguise is so perfect,' she said, after a long, deep pause, 'that I never for a moment so much as suspected it. And, what's more, when you told me at first, I couldn't believe it; but your voice—your voice—how have you altered even that so profoundly, so completely?'

Ruric Brassoff sighed deeply.

'Ah, that was hard indeed,' he answered. 'There's only one way. Compression and alteration of shape in the larynx, with operations on the vocal cords, and constant use of local muscular astringents. Those, aided by fresh habits of life and English intonation—with my cheek-pieces to boot—have given me a new voice even in speaking Russian. As for my handwriting, that's nothing. Anyone can manage that. I practise both hands constantly, and alternate them as I please. One's my original style, written with a backward slope and a thick blunt pen, very Russian and natural; the other's acquired, written the opposite way, and with a fine-pointed nib, forming all my letters on the common English model. But, Olga, you're the very first person in the world who has ever been permitted to penetrate my disguise. And only because I feared you might wreck all by your imprudence, and because I didn't like to risk committing the facts to writing—especially to you, who are so liable to interruption by the agents of the

tyranny—I decided, after long debate, to ask you round here to-day to talk things over with me. I want to show you how dangerous, how undesirable, it is for you to make any further inquiries about Owen and Sacha Cazalet.'

CHAPTER XIX.

CONSPIRACY.

'Of course,' Madame said, still trembling inwardly, 'they are Sergius Selistoff's children.'

Mr. Hayward bent his head.

'Sergius Selistoff's children,' he repeated. 'Yes, Sergius Selistoff's children. When the Terror broke out, and Sergius Selistoff was hurried away by administrative power to the Siberian mines, I managed to smuggle off Madame Selistoff unperceived, with the little ones by her side, as far as Wilna. There, as you must of course remember, the poor lady's brain, tortured by the thought of her husband's hideous fate and her anxiety for her children, gave way altogether. She rushed out into the streets, raving mad, from her place of concealment, crying aloud that the Czar was murdering her Sergius and stealing her babies from her; and for the little ones' sake—there was no help for it—we were obliged to abandon her. It was some weeks before I could carry the poor orphaned creatures surreptitiously across the Prussian frontier, and then by steamer from Dantzic to England. Madame Selistoff, as you know, died meanwhile, still raving mad, in the asylum at Wilna, and I was forced, for our poor martyr's sake, to undertake the charge of Sacha and the boy Sergius.'

'Whom you call Owen?' Madame put in interrogatively.

'Whom we now call Owen,' Mr. Hayward assented, with a fatherly smile. 'You see, Olga, the girl was four years old, and wouldn't hear of being called by any name but Sacha, which was the pet name she'd always borne in her father's house at Petersburg; so I had to leave her alone; but the boy was a baby, and as I wished

to bring him up a thorough-going Englishman, I committed him at once to Miss Cazalet's care, under the name of Owen. It was years before he knew he was Russian by origin.'

'You were still Ruric Brassoff, then?' Madame asked.

'Not exactly. I was passing just that moment through an intermediate state—reversing the usual process—from butterfly to caterpillar. I took them personally to Miss Cazalet's, representing myself as a Polish refugee, but with the face and complexion of the Ruric Brassoff that used to be. I told the poor lady—who's a feeble-minded English old maid; you know the type: weak tea, respectability, district-visiting, the Central African missions—they were her half-sister's children. Madame Selistoff had given me the address and the family history before I started, and Sacha was quite old enough to understand and remember most things. But I explained to the good aunt it would be dangerous to let it get noised abroad they were Russians and Selistoffs; the Czar might claim them as his subjects, and send them, too, to Siberia. I frightened her so much, indeed, that she consented at last to acquiesce in the story that their father had died in Canada, and to suppress their real name—which was much for an Englishwoman. They've been brought up ever since in her house, as Cazalets, and as British subjects, though Alexandra never forgot she was a Selistoff born, nor the horror and terror of those days at Wilna.'

'And the change of face?' Madame inquired.

'The change of face came afterwards. For three years I never saw Miss Cazalet again, though I wrote to her occasionally and sent her money for her children—how hard earned, God only knows; saved often by starving myself from the Ruric Brassoff you knew to the spare and weather-worn man you see before you now. Meanwhile, I was undergoing my new birth—passing through my chrysalis stage in holes and corners—resting quiescent as Ruric Brassoff, to emerge from the shell as Lambert Hayward, an Englishman. Bergmann, of Berlin, transformed my voice for me—most difficult operation on the vocal cords. Charcot managed

my features, not knowing who I might be or why I wanted them altered. I learned English, too, in an English family in Yorkshire, and having our Russian taste for languages, like yourself, perfected myself rapidly. When the metamorphosis was complete I took to photography. I'd been an amateur in Petersburg, you remember, and I made it pay in London. Having lost my all, for the sake of the Cause, I was bound to make money.'

'And does the aunt—the old maid—know all this?' Madame asked with deep interest.

'Not a soul on earth but yourself knows a word of it. You are the first—most likely you will be the last—who has ever been so honoured. Not even Sacha suspects it—my disguise was so perfect. I have such little doubt of its absolute effectiveness that I'd go to Petersburg itself, if necessary, as an English tourist. Well, at the end of three years I saw Miss Cazalet again, this time as an Englishman who had known Sergius Selistoff and his wife at Vienna. I drove a hard-and-fast bargain with her, which has been loyally kept on both sides ever since. I engaged to keep Owen, and pay for his education, and start him in life as my own son, if she'd let me have him with me for two months in each year to do as I liked with. Poor lady! she jumped at it—though she'd have cut her throat sooner if she'd known what I really wanted him for—she, with her narrow Evangelical views and her Central African missions; absorbed, not so much in the bread of life, as in the necessity of getting it from this, that, or the other particular baker. But she took me for an Englishman, and she takes me for one still, though she has doubts in her own mind now as to the rightfulness of the bargain and as to the nature of my journeyings up and down over Europe.'

'Well, and what are you going to do with the young man?' Madame Mireff asked again. 'He looks like fine fibre—fit for any service humanity may choose to require of him.'

'He is,' Ruric Brassoff answered, with affectionate pride. 'A magnificent body; a pure, enthusiastic, un-

selfish soul. Our best Russian characteristics have come out in him full-toned—only heightened and improved by free English training. He's a noble instrument for a noble end. Frankly, Olga, I'm proud of him.'

'And he belongs to the Cause?'

'Implicitly. He has sucked it in at the breast with his mother's milk almost. From his earliest boyhood, as soon as he was able to understand anything, I began preparing the way beforehand, ploughing and harrowing the soil, sowing the good seed tentatively, in proportion as his years would permit him to receive it. And it fell on good ground; being Sergius Selistoff's son, he was naturally receptive. He loves Russia with a love passing the love of those who have lived in it and known it. The Cause of free Slavonia is to him an ideal, an aspiration, a religion. He is one of us to the core. He has no doubts, no hesitations.'

'I see,' Madame answered. 'That is fine; that is splendid. And you're going to put him, Lady Beaumont said, I think, into the English diplomatic service.'

'Yes. He'll be useful to us there as he would be nowhere else. It's a long task, to be free. We must build for the future. I've been building this one step patiently for twenty years and more. . . . *Attachés* and ambassadors have access to Court dignitaries which no one else can secure. . . . A day may come when Owen Cazalet can strike a great blow for Russia.' He paused, and drummed hard with one finger on the table. Then he added, once more in a quaintly pensive tone: 'I read in an anthropological book this morning that on Savage Island, in the South Pacific, a line of kings once reigned over a dusky people. But as these kings partook of a Divine nature, and were supposed to make the rain fall, and the crops grow apace, their subjects got angry with them when the food-supplies fell short, and killed them off rapidly, one after another, in a spell of bad seasons, till at last so many kings were clubbed to death in succession that nobody cared to accept the office. The title went begging for want of aspirants. . . . And I laid down the book, and thought of Russia.'

Madame Mireff smiled grimly.

'But, then, Owen doesn't know who you are?' she asked in an after-thought.

'No, even Owen doesn't know. As for Sacha, though she suspects me, no doubt, of being a Russian, perhaps even a Nihilist, she knows nothing at all—and, with true Slav reticence, abstains from asking me. She's a fine creature, Sacha. I believe, if she knew, she'd sympathize all round, for she remembers her mother's death and her father's long slavery. But she's a genuine Slavonic type in that also; she sees it's no business of hers, and she makes no inquiries. There's something about Sacha's subdued steadfastness of purpose I admire immensely. Old and worn as I am, if ever I married now, I sometimes think to myself I'd marry Sacha Cazalet.'

He paused a moment and sighed. No, no, he himself was above those weaknesses he had pointed out to Owen as the great stumbling-blocks in a patriot's path. True Russian ascetic at heart, he had brought his body under, and his soul as well. No snare for *him* there! He could smile at the bare thought of it.

'And now you see, Olga Mireff,' he went on, more grave than ever, 'how unwisely you are acting, and how you were thwarting my plans—the plans of the Cause—by suggesting in public those children might be Russians. My one object in Owen's education has been to make him an Englishman all over, in externals at least—to make him strong and good at games, and personally popular with Englishmen. I wanted nobody even to suspect any Russian connection. I wanted this bolt to fall upon them from the blue—attempt on the life of the great head of the criminals; the aggressor, an Englishman, a servant of the British Crown—an *attaché* or ambassador at Constantinople, say, or at Athens. Conceive what a sensation! And you nearly spoilt all—you, a woman, and unbid—by suggesting in the room where Lord Caistor was sitting, that my fine English young man, my typical Briton, may be, after all, a son of Sergius Selistoff's!'

Madame covered her face with her hands at the magnitude of her own error.

'Oh, this is too terrible of me!' she cried, all penitence. 'What folly! What indiscretion! But I did it only

because I wanted to know the facts—to save them from the clutches of Alexis Selistoff in Petersburg.'

'He asked you to hunt them up?' Mr. Hayward asked calmly.

'Yes; he asked me to hunt them up, and how could I know you were interested in keeping it secret? I wanted to warn the dear souls against that man—that implacable bureaucrat, that vile tool, their uncle. If ever he discovered them, he'd be capable, I believe, of inviting them to Petersburg under friendly promises, and then killing them with his own hand, or flinging them secretly into his cells, to avenge and wipe out the family disgrace, as he considers it; and I wanted to save them! But all I've done, it seems, is to surprise the secret you desired to keep. I've forced your hand, I know well. . . . Ruric Brassoff, there's but one way I can atone for my wrong-doing.'

She looked up at him with fierce pride. Mr. Hayward eyed her pityingly.

'Olga,' he said, after a long pause, 'you're quite right. There's but one way out of it. And when I invited you to come here to-day, I meant to ask you to follow that way to the bitter end. If I asked you, I know your devotion well enough to feel sure you'd obey. The woman who has discovered Ruric Brassoff's identity against his will—the woman who alone of living creatures could bring a spy to this spot, and point her finger at me and say, "This is he; arrest him"—that woman ought to go home without one moment's hesitation and cut her own throat or blow her own brains out. The Cause demands it, I know; and the martyr would be forthcoming.'

Madame rose and confronted him. Her eyes flashed fire.

'Ruric Brassoff!' she exclaimed haughtily, 'you have said it. It is done—already.'

He seized her hand and checked her.

'No, no!' he cried; 'not so fast. I didn't mean *that!* I have other plans yet in store. Olga Mireff, I need you still. For the sake of the Cause, I command you—I forbid you. I give you a harder task yet. . . . Live on, and keep silence.'

'Then you trust me!' the woman cried, trembling with joy all over at so signal a proof of Ruric Brassoff's confidence.

'I trust you,' he answered low. 'Live on to complete our great work, Olga Mireff. But never breathe to a soul that you have seen or known me.'

She looked at him, proud and resolute.

'Ruric Brassoff,' she said, beaming delight, 'I am yours, and Russia's. You can do as you will with me. Say "Die!" and I die; say "Live!" and I live on, were it in speechless misery.'

He bowed his head towards her, acquiescent.

'It is atoned,' he said slowly.

She lifted those rich lips. 'For Russia!' she murmured beseechingly.

He stooped down, and just touched them.

'For Russia!' he answered, in the tone of one inspired. 'For Russia only. For Russia.'

She started back, rosy red. She was a woman, after all.

'Thank you, Ruric,' she answered. 'I shall remember that kiss through life. My lips are holy now. Russia's noblest son has deigned to sanctify them.'

He motioned her away with his hand. She moved slowly to the door.

'Good-bye,' she said, enraptured, with her hand on the door-post. 'Never again, dear brother. But as you bid me, I live; and no torture shall drag your secret from me.'

CHAPTER XX.

SORE TEMPTED.

It was autumn at Moor Hill, and the beeches on the chalk downs had put on their imperial robes of crimson and gold and Tyrian purple. How could Sacha resist the temptation of a visit to Aunt Julia's at such an enticing time? Impossible; she felt she must run down to see them. There was a holiday on the Stock

Exchange, too, and Trevor Gardener, most timid of men, still all tentative politeness, had asked leave to accompany her.

'That's the worst of allowing these people a foothold in one's house as hewers of wood and drawers of water,' Sacha grumbled, half petulantly, to Ionê. 'They presume upon their position, and want at last to dine at the same table, instead of sticking, as they ought, to their place in the kitchen. We'd have done better to go in, I see, for being thoroughly independent from the very first outset. The mistake was made when we permitted such an insinuating creature as a man to come interfering at all with our cosy little phalanstery.'

'They *are* insinuating—sometimes,' Ionê answered, with a mischievous laugh. 'And sometimes they're not—not half insinuating enough—especially when you'd like them to be. They want you to lift them over all the hard stiles, instead of lending you a helping hand to get over yourself, out of consideration for your skirts, and your native modesty as a woman. I've met some of them that way.' Perhaps she was thinking of Owen. 'But my dear, you may grumble about them as much as ever you like—you won't take me in.' And she shook a wise little head. 'We wouldn't get on half as well without them. But as it wouldn't be proper, of course, for you and Mr. Gardener to go down together alone, why, sooner than shock Mrs. Grundy or your aunt, I don't mind obliging you myself, and making the third, who's proverbially no company. I'd like so much to see'—she didn't say Owen, but—'your old studio at the Red Cottage.'

It is thus that even the frankest of us use language, as Talleyrand said, to conceal our thoughts. For Ionê, after all, was as frank as it is given her half of the human species ever to show itself openly.

When Aunt Julia heard she was coming—'that dreadful toozly-haired creature, you know, that you met in Morocco, Owen, and whose portrait in men's clothes, and a Mussulman's at that (or should one say a Mussulwoman's?), was put in the *Graphic*'—her horror and alarm were simply unbounded. 'What Sacha can mean

by bringing the girl down here and flinging her at your head, I'm sure I can't conceive,' Aunt Julia sighed dismally. 'But there, what the young women of this age are coming to, heaven only knows; with their flats and their latchkeys and their riding like gentlemen; it's enough to make their grandmothers turn in their graves. *You* won't care for her, Owen, that's one comfort, for I know you always say you like women to be womanly, and this creature's exactly the same as a man, and not a good man at that, either. I read some of her article about Morocco in the *Bi-monthly Review*—I *couldn't* read it all—and it showed she was utterly devoid of sound Christian principles. She goes into one of the dark places of the earth without making the faintest attempt to spread the light there. She jokes about the most serious subjects in a really painful way; talks of Mohammedans without one word as to their errors or their immortal souls; and lived at one place in an old Moor's house, who had three wives in his harem, which is certainly not respectable. When I was a girl, a woman who did such things as that would have been ashamed to speak out about them; but nowadays they write a full account of their vagaries in a magazine, as if masquerading in man's clothes was something to be proud of.'

Owen said nothing. But the fact that Aunt Julia thought so ill of Ionê rather operated in his mind as an extra attraction to the pretty Greek girl than otherwise. It was an unfortunate knack of Aunt Julia's, indeed, not unknown amongst old maids, to rouse opposition at once in young people's souls by the mere manner of her pronouncement. And if there was anything Aunt Julia wanted Owen to do, she couldn't have devised a better means of ensuring her end than to preach at him, in season and out of season, that he oughtn't to do it.

But when Ionê really came, she burst upon them, as usual, like a ray of sunlight. Even the prop of the Universities Mission herself, prepared for a most masculine and forbidding person, was taken aback at the first blush by Ionê's joyous and irrepressibly girlish personality.

'So this is Aunt Julia!' the dreaded stranger cried,

taking both Miss Cazalet's hands warmly in hers, as the mistress of the house, with solemn dignity, in all the glory of her black silk and her creamy lace head-dress, stood awsome by the jasmine-covered porch to receive them. 'I've heard such a lot about Aunt Julia from Owen and Sacha already that I almost seem to know you by anticipation; and as for me, I'm afraid you've seen a great deal too much of me in the papers long ago—those dreadful papers! Oh yes, I know—they've stuck me in in all attitudes and all earthly costumes till I'm sick of seeing in print "Miss Ionê Dracopoli." It's simply wearisome. But what a sweet little cottage, though—and what lovely chrysanthemums! I never saw such a splendid outdoor specimen in my life as that white Japanese one. You should send it to a flower-show!'

Now, chrysanthemums, as it happened, were Aunt Julia's one weakness (we are all of us human), and Ionê had heard of that weakness beforehand, and, after her feminine fashion, had dexterously utilized it. But the remark and the fresh exuberance of that brisk young life had their due effect, none the less, in mollifying Aunt Julia's stony British heart. She could never quite forgive Ionê, to be sure, for neglecting to distribute an Arabic version of 'Jessica's First Prayer' in the harem at Oran; but she admitted to herself grudgingly in her own small soul that the poor child was, at any rate, as she phrased it, 'an amiable heathen.'

As for Trevor Gardener, Aunt Julia thought well of him at the very first blush—an expression which in this case was strictly appropriate. He wore spotless kid gloves and very shiny white shirt-cuffs, the sight of which made her feel instinctively sure of the soundness of his principles. For not only were principles the object of a perfect idolatry with Aunt Julia; they were also recognisable to the naked eye; she spoke of them always as of articles that might be weighed and measured, so to speak, by the square foot or the pound avoirdupois. She was a connoisseur in principles, indeed. She liked the very best, and she knew them at once when she saw them.

After lunch, Sacha proposed a walk on the downs. The

idea, though not so very original, after all, struck Owen at once as particularly brilliant. A walk on the downs! How clever, now, of Sacha! He didn't want to talk to Ionê alone for anything special, of course; Mr. Hayward's solemn warning against the pitfalls of the sex had sunk too deep into his mind for any such wickedness as that; but still, at Aunt Julia's, you know, and in the drawing-room, before all those listening ears, why, what could one talk about worth hearing to such a girl as Ionê? For, though Owen had only met Ionê half a dozen times, all told, since his return from Morocco, he felt vaguely to himself that he and she, while not the least bit in the world *in love* with one another, of course, had yet arrived instinctively—well, at a sort of understanding between themselves—that kind of understanding, don't you know, which makes it quite impossible to talk your mind out freely before a third person.

We have all been there ourselves, and we know what it means. Not *love*—oh dear no! not necessarily or exactly what you may call downright *love*, don't you see, but a sort of sympathy, or friendship, or familiarity, or good fellowship, or let us even say—ahem!—confidential relations. No harm in the world in confidential relations. Provided always—but there, what's the use of talking about it? We have been there ourselves, I repeat—and we remember where it landed us!

As they strolled up the hill, all four of them together, the path between the hedge and the wood was narrow. Only room for two abreast—so they paired off, naturally. Owen's long legs made him stride on in front; and Ionê kept up with him like a trained mountain-climber. Trevor Gardener, on the contrary, always correct in his dress, and with namesake flower in his buttonhole, walked a more town-bred pace with Sacha behind. The two athletes soon distanced him, and were well out of earshot among the crimson-clad beeches.

'I'm glad we came out,' Owen broke forth at last, after one long deep pause, gazing hard, though askance, at his companion's fresh face. 'It's so nice to be alone with you once again, Ionê.'

He said it with the shy but naïve frankness of the

hobbledehoy to the budding girl. Ionê's cheek, already rosy with the walk uphill, flushed a deeper red still as he spoke—and looked at her. There was more in his look ten thousand times than in his words.

'Then, you like to be with me, Owen?' she asked, just as frankly, in return, with that free Greek unreserve of hers.

Owen started and looked again.

'Why, of course I do!' he answered quickly. 'Who wouldn't, Ionê?'

Ionê stepped on, now treading springy on the close sward of the open downs. Her footfall was light and tripping as an Oread's.

'That's nice!' she said, with a simple smile. 'One likes best to be liked by those one likes one's self, don't you think? So much better than all those smart men one meets up in London.'

'You go out a great deal?' Owen asked, trembling. It meant so much to him.

'Well, you see, just this season I was a sort of a lion. Next year it'll have worn off, and everybody'll have forgotten me. But this year I've been made much of, and asked out for a show—just to swell Mrs. Brown's or Lady Vere de Vere's triumph.'

'And the men talk a great deal to you?'

'Yes. You know the way they talk. Men who've seen everything, know everybody, go everywhere. Men who say clever things—with a sting in the tail. Men who don't seem to believe in the existence of truth or goodness anywhere. They come up to me, all outward deference, but with a lurking suspicion in their eyes that seems to say, "Now, what game are *you* playing? How do you want to tackle me?" And then their talk!' She mimicked them mischievously. '"Going to any of these dances tonight?" "Yes, going to two or three of them." "Know the Burne-Joneses?" "No. Why? Are they giving a party?" I heard a man say that one night, in town, I assure you. Oh, isn't it just sickening? I'm glad the autumn's come and the season's all over. I'm glad to get down here, if it's only for a day—one lovely day—to nature and reality.'

'It was good of you to come,' Owen murmured, abashed and afraid. 'I was so awfully glad when I heard you were coming.'

Ionê turned to him with a flash of light in her happy eyes. The chestnut hair blew free round her face in the autumn breeze. Her glance was very tender.

'Oh, Owen! then you wanted me?' she said. She was too much in love with him herself not to throw herself so upon him.

Owen drew back and hesitated. He knew only too well he was on dangerous ground. If Mr. Hayward were but there to see how sorely he was tempted! But Mr. Hayward was far away, and Ionê was near—very near indeed. Her breath blew warm on his cheek. Her eyes held him and fascinated him.

'Yes, I wanted you—Ionê,' he said slowly. But he said it with a reservation. He knew how very wrong it was. This siren was charming him away from the plain path of duty.

As for Ionê, she drew back like one stung. The reservation in his voice roused the woman within her. She felt herself slighted. She felt she had flung herself upon him—and he had rejected the boon. No woman on earth can stand that. She drew away from him proudly.

'Let's sit down and wait for Sacha,' she said coldly in an altered tone. 'They'll be coming up soon. I oughtn't to have got so far in front of her.'

It was Owen's turn now to feel a pang of remorse.

'Oh no, don't let's sit down,' he cried; 'don't deprive me of this pleasure. Ionê, I've longed so to get a few words with you alone ever since you arrived at Moor Hill this morning. You can't think what a joy it is to me just to walk by your side, just to hear your sweet voice. You're so different from other girls. I'm so happy when I'm with you.'

'Happy?' Ionê repeated, half angrily.

'Oh, you know I am. You can see it. Why, I thrill all over.'

His knees trembled as he said it. But he said it all the same. He looked at her shyly as he spoke, blushing red with first love. He'd have given worlds to kiss her.

And he would have done it, too—if it hadn't been for the Cause and Mr. Hayward.

'Then why did you say in that tone: "Ye-es—um—I—ah—wanted you—Ionê"?'

'Because,' Owen cried, driven to bay, and with his heart throbbing wildly, 'I longed to say, "Yes, madly—intensely—unspeakably." But I know it's quite wrong. I oughtn't to speak so to you.'

'Why not?' Ionê asked, fronting him with inexorable calmness.

Owen looked at her harder still.

Oh, how beautiful she was, how strong, how free, how irresistible! Talk about the Cause indeed! What was the Cause to him to-day? Has a Cause such bright eyes as that, such red lips, such blushing cheeks, such a heaving bosom? Has a Cause such soft hands?

'Because,' he faltered feebly once more, 'how can I fall in love now—at barely twenty-one—and with nothing to live upon?'

'But you *have* fallen in love,' Ionê answered demonstratively.

She knew it better than he did. She saw it quite clearly in his face by this time, and being herself, she said so.

That straight statement of a plain fact helped Owen out immensely.

'Yes, I *have* fallen in love,' he answered, panting, and with his heart in his mouth. 'Oh, Ionê, so very much! I love you with all my soul. I shall always love you—you ever, and you only.'

'I knew it,' Ionê answered, flushing bright red once more, and with the love-light in her eyes. 'And—I love you the same, Owen. I loved you almost from that very first night at Ain-Essa. . . . And, oh, if we both feel it, why shouldn't we say so?'

They had wandered away from the path as they spoke, behind great clumps of holly bushes.

Owen looked at her once more, raised his hand, and caught hers instinctively.

'Because it would be wrong of me!' he murmured, all tremulous, clasping her fingers in his own. 'I mustn't

even kiss you.' But he bent forward as he spoke. 'I don't belong to myself,' he cried; 'I am bought with a price. I should be doing injustice to others if I were to give way to my love for you.'

'What's her name?' Ionê asked teasingly, withdrawing her hand with a coquettish little air from her lover's.

For she knew very well in her own heart there was no *she* in the matter.

'Oh, Ionê,' Owen cried, all reproach. 'You *know* very well there's nobody on earth I care a pin for but you. And for you—I would die for you!'

'Yes, I know,' Ionê answered, turning suddenly round and facing him. Her voice, though still tremulous, rang quick, clear, and decisive. 'I know what it all means; I guessed it long ago. You don't think you must fall in love with me, because you're otherwise engaged. You promised that horrid Nihilist man to blow up the Czar for him.'

She had played a bold card, played it well and effectively. She meant to release Owen from this hateful thraldom, as she felt it to be, and she went the right way to work to effect her purpose.

Owen gazed at her astonished. How had she divined his secret? Then, in a moment, it came over him like a wave that, if she knew all already, there was, and could be now, no barrier between them. The holly-bushes, thank Heaven! rose tall and thick, and screened them from observation. He seized her hand. He pressed it hard. He touched her rich red lips.

'Oh, my darling!' he cried, in a transport of wild joy—of sudden relief from terrible tension. 'I love you—I love you! I shall always love you!'

He clasped her in his arms.

She nestled there gladly.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE EQUALITY OF WOMAN.

It was quite a long time before Sacha and Trevor Gardener caught them up. And the reason was, in part, because Sacha and Trevor Gardener were equally well employed on their own account independently.

He was a shy man, Trevor Gardener, and they'd climbed a long way up the steep slope of the hill before he turned round to his companion with a sudden burst, and blurted out in his modestly jerky way:

'Look here, Sacha, it was awfully good of you to suggest we should come out like this, this afternoon. I was *so* angry when Ionê first proposed to run down with us. I wanted a *tête-à-tête* with you, and her coming spoiled it.'

'I knew you did, Trevor,' Sacha answered calmly. It had been 'Trevor' and 'Sacha' from the very first with them in that most modern household, where conventions were not. 'I knew you did, and that's why I proposed coming out here.'

'Oh, how kind of you!' Trevor Gardener cried, looking admiration unspoken from those honest blue eyes. 'So like you, too, Sacha!'

'I thought it'd be best to get it over once for all,' Sacha answered, unmoved to the outer eye. But she gathered up her skirt and pinned it as she spoke, with hands that trembled just a wee bit more than one would have thought quite likely with such a girl as Sacha.

Trevor Gardener gazed at her astonished, and not a little troubled in mind.

'To get it over!' he echoed, ill at ease. 'Oh, Sacha, what do you mean? To get it over?'

'Well, I thought you had something to say to me,' Sacha continued, outwardly very calm, but with three nervous fingers toying quick on the ivory Japanese button that fastened her watch-chain. 'I gathered it from your manner. And I thought—the sooner said, the sooner mended.'

Trevor Gardener's face fell.

'Then you know . . . what I was going to say to you?' he murmured, much crestfallen.

'We women have our intuitions,' Sacha replied oracularly, still playing with the button.

'And your answer would have been——'

Sacha laughed an amused little laugh.

'How on earth can I say, Trevor,' she exclaimed, more frankly and less timidly, 'when I haven't heard your question?'

Trevor Gardener glanced askance at her, the shy glance of the bashful young man.

'That's true,' he mused, hesitating. 'But still, Sacha—your intuitions, you know—you might *guess* the question.'

Sacha smiled still more broadly.

'What a funny man you are!' she cried, pulling a flower-head as she passed. 'You want me to play both hands at once, your own and mine. You want me to give both question and answer.'

Trevor admitted in his own mind she was perfectly right. And yet, somehow, he couldn't muster up courage to frame in words what he wanted.

'Well, you meant to have this *tête-à-tête* with me, anyhow?' he suggested, after a short pause.

'Oh yes,' Sacha answered. 'I told you so before. I wanted to get it over.'

'It?'

'Yes—it.'

'But you like me, don't you?' the young man burst out pleadingly.

Sacha's face flushed rosy red.

'I like you very much indeed,' she replied. 'When first you came and offered to do our work for us, I was only interested in you—just interested in you—nothing more, because I saw you sympathized with us and understood our motives. But the more I've seen of you the better I've liked you. I like your simplicity of heart, your straightforwardness of action, your singleness of aim, your honest earnestness. I see you're a real live man with a soul of your own, among all these tailor-made

Frankenstein dummies. And I'm very, very fond of you. There, now, will that do for you?'

She turned round upon him almost fiercely, so that the young man quailed. But he mustered up courage all the same to look her full in the face and add:

'And you'll say *yes* to my question, then? You won't refuse me?'

'What is it?' Sacha replied, running her hand through the tall grass nervously as she spoke. 'See here, Trevor. You compel me to be plain.' Her heart was beating violently. 'There are two questions, either of which you may mean to ask, though you might have thought of them yourself as different. One is, "Do you love me?" The other is, "Will you marry me?" There, now,' her face was crimson, but she went on with an effort, 'you've forced me to ask them myself, after all. It isn't woman's sphere—but you've driven me into it. Well, which of the two do you want me to answer?'

Trevor Gardener seized her hand and held it, unresisted, one second in his own. A wave of delight passed over him from head to foot.

'Well, the first one first,' he said, stammering. 'Oh, Sacha, do you love me?'

Sacha tore the tiny spikelets from the grass-head one by one with trembling fingers as she answered in a very firm voice, soft and low:

'Yes, Trevor.'

The young man's heart gave a bound. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it fervently.

'That's everything!' he cried, overjoyed, all his timidity deserting him now; for when a woman once admits she loves you, what have you further to fear? 'And, Sacha, will you marry me?'

'No, Trevor,' Sacha said just as firmly, though still lower, and with a faint under-current of tremulousness in her voice. 'I love to be with you here; but I will never marry you.'

She said it so definitely that the young man started back in unaffected surprise. He saw she meant it.

'Not marry me!' he cried, taken aback, 'when you love me, too! Oh, Sacha, what on earth do you mean by it?'

Sacha put her hand on her heart, as if to still its throbbing. But her answer was one that fairly took his breath away, none the less, by its utter unexpectedness.

'You're rich,' she said slowly, 'quite rich, Trevor, aren't you?'

'Oh, not so rich as all that comes to,' the stockbroker replied apologetically, as who should say, 'Well, it's not my fault if I am; but, still, comfortably off. I could afford to keep you in the position you're accustomed to.'

'How much do you make a year?' Sacha asked, still holding that throbbing heart, and looking into his face appealingly.

'Well, it varies,' the young man answered; 'sometimes more, sometimes less, but always enough to live upon.'

'A thousand a year, perhaps?' Sacha suggested, naming a sum that to her mind seemed princely magnificence.

'Oh yes, a thousand a year, certainly,' Trevor answered, smiling.

'Two thousand?' Sacha put in with a gasp, her heart beginning to sink.

'Oh yes, two thousand,' the young man responded as carelessly as if it were a mere trifle. What on earth could she be driving at?

'Three thousand?' Sacha faltered.

'Well, perhaps three thousand,' Trevor admitted with candour; 'though that depends upon the year. Still, one time with another, I should say—well, yes, about three thousand.'

Sacha drew a deep breath. A pained look crossed her face.

'Oh, then it's quite impossible!' she cried. 'Quite, quite impossible!'

'Why so, darling,' Trevor ventured to ask, 'since you say you love me?'

Sacha was trembling all over. Her lips looked deadly pale. But she forced herself to speak out, with all the restrained strength of her strong Russian nature.

'Because, if you're as rich as all that,' she said slowly,

'I must give up my independence; I must give up my individuality; I must give up my creed in life, which is the equal freedom of women with men; and I must be merely your wife—like the girls who sell themselves to rich fools for a livelihood. What I could earn by my art would be a mere drop in the bucket. If ever I married, I wanted to marry a man whose earnings were only about the same as my own, and towards whom I could feel like an equal, a partner, a fellow bread-winner.'

She said it very earnestly. It was her faith, her religion; but something in her tone made Trevor Gardener pause.

'Is that all?' he said at last, after a long, deep silence, during which each could almost hear the other's heart beat.

And Sacha, in her perfect truthfulness, was constrained to answer:

'No, not *quite* all, Trevor.'

'And what's the rest?' he asked eagerly, seizing her hand again as he looked. 'You must tell me now, darling.'

Sacha turned away her flushed face. She dared not meet his honest eyes.

'Oh, don't ask me that, please!' she cried. 'Don't try to force it out of me! I shall have a hard struggle to keep it in, I know; but I don't want to tell you.'

A sudden thought flashed all at once across Trevor Gardener's mind. Many things grew clear to him in one of those rapid intuitions that sometimes break in upon us at great critical moments.

'I know it! I know it!' he cried eagerly. 'You need say no more. It's on account of Owen.'

'What do you mean?' Sacha cried, facing him in her terror, and thoroughly frightened now; 'I never *told* you so.'

'No,' the young man answered. 'But I see it for myself. You don't want to do anything while Owen's future remains so uncertain.'

Sacha gazed at him all appalled. What had he found out about Owen? She put forth her hand and clutched his arm in her nervous excitement.

'Owen's future!' she cried, deadly pale. 'Why, who told you *that*, I wonder?'

Trevor Gardener in his turn felt a sudden thrill of revelation. There was more in this than he knew. He had touched some strange chord in her nature too lightly.

'Sacha,' he exclaimed in a tone of regret, 'I've done wrong, I see; but I didn't know. I didn't understand it—though I half understand now. But only half. I think I can partly guess. Owen's not his own master. He's sailing, I fancy, under sealed orders.'

'You have said it—not I,' Sacha faltered, all trembling. 'I *know* no more than you do.'

The young man seized her hand once more, and raised it reverently to his lips.

'I ask you no questions,' he said. 'I respect your unspoken wish. But some day this knot, no doubt, will unravel itself. Till then I'll wait for you. And if not—why, Sacha, I'll wait for you for ever.'

CHAPTER XXII.

THE NEMESIS OF CULTURE.

In London, that same afternoon, it occurred quite casually to Mr. Henley Stokes, at 5, Pump Court, Temple, that, as Sacha and Ionê had gone down to Moor Hill for the day together, Blackbird might possibly find herself rather lonely at the flat off Victoria Street. So, being a good-natured though timid and unsophisticated young man, prone to attempt works of charity in however humble a sphere, he decided with himself, after an internal struggle, to step round to the flat and bear the Cinderella company.

Mr. Henley Stokes was always close-shaven, but seldom did his face look so preternaturally clean and shiny as on that particular afternoon. Mr. Henley Stokes wore an orchid in his buttonhole as a matter of principle. He was 'sound,' the Birmingham party said, very sound, politically; but never in his life before had so gorgeous

an orchid graced his best frock-coat, or so glossy a tall silk hat pressed the curls on his forehead. He stood long before the glass arranging his tie in a loose sailor knot before he went out; and as he glided along on the District Railway in a first-class carriage, he flashed his cuffs more than once with uneasy solicitude.

It was clear that Henley Stokes, good philanthropist as he was, attached much importance to saving Hope Braithwaite from the dulness of her solitude.

When he rang at the door of the flat, Blackbird opened it to him herself, and then ran back into the passage.

Her sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, and she wore over her dress a dainty cretonne apron; but she looked as graceful as ever for all that, in her lithe, though melancholy girlish fashion.

'I'm housemaid to-day, you see,' she said, somewhat less listlessly than usual, pulling her sleeves down hurriedly. 'Ionê answers the door as a rule. But the others are gone away. You must excuse my appearance.'

Henley Stokes stammered out something inaudible about her appearance requiring no apology—quite the contrary, quite the contrary—and followed her into the passage, looking intensely sheepish.

Blackbird, too, had an air as of one caught at some awkward moment.

'You must let me run out into the laboratory a second,' she said, almost blushing in those pallid thin cheeks of hers. 'I've something to put away out there. I—er—I was pottering about with my chemicals.'

'Oh, let *me* come and help you,' the barrister put in confusedly. 'You see, I know all the back premises so well, of course. I cleared away all that litter there before you were up this morning.'

'Oh no, you mustn't come,' Blackbird cried, waving him back; but the philanthropic young man wouldn't brook being gainsaid. He followed her out into the little pantry—for it was really nothing more—and helped her to take off the queer things she was brewing.

It was only casually as he did so that he happened to

observe she had been distilling something greenish from a heap of bruised leaves. A book of directions lay open on the table at 'Hydrocyanic Acid.' A smell as of laurel-water pervaded the little laboratory.

But at the moment Henley Stokes hardly heeded these details. His mind was too much occupied—so he thought just then—with more important matters.

They cleared away the mess, strained the water from the bruised leaves, and put the still she had been working with into the corner cupboard. Then Blackbird suddenly transformed herself into a drawing-room lady. She loosed her great mass of black hair about her face and shoulders, pulled off her pretty apron, replaced her white cuffs, and went back to the front-room, followed closely by her visitor.

There she flung herself, as was her wont, into the long wicker chair, and clasped her hands behind her head.

'You look tired,' Henley Stokes ventured to murmur sympathetically.

'Yes, tired,' she echoed, closing her eyes, 'very tired indeed,' in a voice of utter lassitude. 'When wasn't I tired, I should like to know?' she added, almost fiercely. 'I was born tired, I believe; at any rate, I've been tired ever since—as long as I can remember I've been tired uninterruptedly, dead tired, dog tired! It's the epitome of my existence.'

The young man leaned across towards her.

'Miss Braithwaite——' he began, half tenderly.

Blackbird lifted her lids, looked up at him, and flashed fire from her lustrous eyes.

'How strange it is,' she cried petulantly, 'that you call both the others by their Christian names; but you call *me*, as if on purpose, so stiffly, Miss Braithwaite. Do you do it intentionally? Why this invidious distinction?'

'Invidious!' Henley answered, taken aback. 'Oh no, it isn't invidious. I could hardly explain to you the reason just yet; but it's because—well, because I respect and like you so much. When you respect a woman immensely, don't you know, you—er—are afraid to take liberties with her.'

'I don't ask you to take liberties,' Blackbird cried, half pouting. 'You take no liberties with Sacha.'

'Dear me, no!' Henley answered submissively, with a smile at the bare idea. 'I can't imagine anyone brave enough to take liberties with Miss Cazalet.'

'And yet you call her Sacha,' Blackbird retorted, uncrossing and recrossing her hands with nervous agitation.

'Well, I'd call you Hope—if I dared,' the young man said shyly.

Blackbird fired up at the word.

'Hope!' she cried, with a wild gesture of repulse—'Hope! Hope! and to me! They christened me Hope, did they? They should have called me Despair. It would have been much more appropriate.'

Henley Stokes looked pityingly at her from those honest kind eyes of his.

'No, no,' he put in hastily. 'Don't say that, please . . . Blackbird. I may call you Blackbird? Oh, thank you. It's so kind of you. . . . And you know why I never called you Blackbird before, till this very day, though all the others did, and though I called the others Ionê and Sacha? You *must* know. Can't you guess? It isn't very difficult.'

Blackbird shook her head sturdily. This was a bad afternoon with her.

'Well, because I loved you, then,' Henley Stokes went on. 'And when a man really loves a girl, he's a thousand times more particular about what he says or does to her—a thousand times more careful of her dignity and her sanctity—than with all the others.'

He spoke rapidly, thickly, but with a mingled earnestness and nervousness that might have melted a stone. And he watched Blackbird's face as he spoke, not daring to take her hand, though it lay on the wicker ledge of the long low chair, just six inches from his own. He was trembling all over. Blackbird saw his eyes glance for a second at those thin white fingers, as if in doubt whether to clasp them or not, and withdrew them hurriedly. Henley noted the action and sighed. There was a long deep pause. Then Blackbird began once more in her weary voice:

Why do you say these things to me?'

'I've told you,' the young man answered, thrilling. 'Because I love you, Blackbird.'

Blackbird raised her white hand—thin, delicate, blue-veined—and snapped one slender middle finger against the thumb most daintily. In any other woman the action would have been trivial, nay, almost vulgar. In Blackbird it seemed so spiritualized and etherealized by the length and thinness of the fingers that Henley's heart only sank at it.

'Love!' she cried, with a sudden outburst. 'Love, love! What is it? Pain I know and sleep I know—sleep less well than pain—but pleasure and love?—in *my* world, they are not.'

Henley Stokes gazed down upon her with eyes of infinite pity. This strange aerial creature, all music and thought, with no body to speak of, had yet a strange fascination for the well-dressed, well-to-do, simple-hearted man about town. She had the double attraction of novelty and contrast. She was not in the least like himself, not the least like anybody. She was unique, unmatchable. But he hardly knew what to say, all the same, to so curious an outbreak.

'Sleep you know!' he murmured low. 'And is that the very nearest you ever get to pleasure, Blackbird?'

The girl threw back her well-poised head, turned up her lustrous eyes, and displayed unconsciously to the best advantage that full and luscious throat which marks the vocalist's temperament.

'The very nearest I ever get to it,' she answered slowly. 'Yes, the very, very nearest.' She clasped her blue-veined hands behind her head once more, and closed her big eyes dreamily. Henley longed to stoop over her and kiss the full throat, in his pure, warm passion; but his heart misgave him. Blackbird drew a deep breath or two; her bosom rose and fell. She sighed as naturally as though no one were looking on. She was too modern, too weak, too frail to be afraid of him. 'No, I don't often sleep,' she went on, as if two-thirds to herself. 'Mostly, now, I lie awake, and repeat those sweet lines from Andrew Lang's Ballade, that I set to music:

'"Shy dreams flit to and fro
With shadowy hair dispread;
With wistful eyes that glow,
And silent robes that sweep.
Thou wilt not hear me—no?
Wilt thou not hear me, Sleep?"

But sometimes at last I doze off for an hour or two; and then it's all so beautiful, so soft, so heavenly. Perhaps I may dream, and even dreams are delicious—for dream, too, is from Zeus, as Agamemnon says to Calchas, in the "Iliad." But oftener I fall asleep and lie like a log for an hour or two without knowing it at all—just the same as if I were dead; and that's loveliest of everything. Perhaps the reason I love Sleep so well is because he seems to promise Death, too, will be gentle.'

'Oh, don't talk like that, Blackbird!' Henley cried, clasping his hands together in genuine distress. 'When you speak so it frightens me. At your age it isn't natural.'

But Blackbird was now enjoying the one tremulous joy she really knew—that of pouring forth her sad soul like a nightingale in the woods to a sympathetic listener—and she wasn't going to be balked of her amusement for so little.

'Just think how delicious it would be,' she went on, still dreamily, with eyes tight shut and head thrown back inert on the padded chair, 'to lie down like this and grow drowsy, drowsy, drowsy; and be dimly conscious one need never wake up again, or move one's tired limbs, or get bothered with thinking. How delicious to feel, without even knowing it, the grass growing green above one's weary limbs; to rest on a bed one need never leave; to be at peace at last—all peace—and for ever!'

'Blackbird!' the young man said; 'if you talk so, you'll kill me!'

'What a service I should be doing you!' Blackbird answered, all at once opening her eyes, and gazing hard at him. 'Don't you think it's one of the worst miseries of our life here on earth to be told from time to time how others have died—this one first, and then that one—and to remember all the while that years upon years may have to pass before ever we can follow them?'

Henley Stokes leaned across to her in genuine distress; but he changed the key suddenly.

'Blackbird,' he began in a very abrupt tone—he loved to repeat that name, now he had once summoned up courage to call her by it—'don't you want to be loved? Don't you long, oh, ever so much, for someone to love you?'

To his immense surprise, Blackbird clenched her hands hard, and sat upright in her seat with unexpected energy.

'Long for it?' she cried, a passionate wave surging over her pale face. 'Hunger and thirst for it! Pine and die for it! From my babyhood upward, I've been yearning to be loved. I want somebody to sympathize with me, to pet me, to be fond of me!'

'And now you've got it!' Henley Stokes murmured slowly.

'And now I've got it,' Blackbird answered. (Was ever so strange a wooing?) She thrust her clenched little fists in her cheeks, and bit her lip till it bled. 'Oh, you poor—poor soul!' she cried; 'what on earth can I say to you?'

'Don't you like me?' the young man asked, bending over her.

'Like you?' Blackbird echoed. 'If anyone will love me I could devour him, I could worship him! I could fall down before him and let him trample me to death! I could kill myself by slow torture for him!'

Dimly even then, Henley Stokes was aware that, in the midst of these ardent protestations, true and heartfelt as they were, the poor child was thinking of herself all the time, not of him; but he was too preoccupied for his own part with Blackbird's sorrows to be definitely conscious of that strange limitation.

'And you'll love me?' he cried, his heart coming up into his mouth for joy. 'Oh, say you won't refuse to let me love you?'

'Love you!' Blackbird answered, clasping her hands on her knees and sitting up still to look straight at him. 'Why, I can't help loving you. If a crossing-sweeper were to love me I must love him in return, I yearn so

for sympathy. And *you*—I love you—oh yes! Oh, ever so much! I'm so grateful to you—so pleased with you.'

'And I may take—just one,' the young man said, pleading hard and leaning forward tentatively.

At that movement, ever so slight, Blackbird drew back all abashed. The bare proposal seemed to shock her—nay, almost to frighten her. She trembled all over.

'Oh no!' she cried aghast. 'Not that—that, never! I'm so grateful for your love; but you didn't want—to *kiss* me!'

She said it with an accent of reproach—almost of positive disgust. But Henley Stokes was more human.

'Well, yes, I did,' he said stoutly, with the unregenerate simplicity of a flesh-and-blood young man. 'That was just what I meant. I wanted to kiss you, Blackbird.'

The girl shrank back into the chair like one cowed.

'Oh, you misunderstand!' she cried, in an almost agonized voice. 'I only meant I *loved* you. I didn't mean I could *kiss*. Such things as that must never come in between us!'

It was Henley's turn now to draw back, astonished.

'But . . . I took this as a proposal,' he faltered out slowly, 'and . . . I thought . . . you accepted me. If we're to consider ourselves engaged—why, surely, surely, I ought to kiss you!'

'Engaged!' Blackbird repeated, in a tone of unutterable contempt. 'What? Engaged to be married! . . . Oh no, dear, dear friend! I never dreamt even of that. It's impossible. Impossible! Wholly, wholly impossible!'

'Why?' Henley Stokes asked, all trembling.

This riddle was too hard for him. What a grand creature she was, to be sure! He could never understand her.

Instead of answering him, Blackbird burst into a sudden flood of tears.

'Oh, I can't tell you to-day,' she sobbed out, holding his hand and rising. 'I'm so happy—so happy! So much happier than I ever was in my life before. Now I know at last what happiness means. Don't let me

kill it outright—don't let me spoil it by telling you why an engagement's impossible.'

And she rushed over to the piano, throbbing and sobbing like a child, and took refuge in a weird piece of her own melancholy music.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PATH OF DUTY.

THAT evening Ionê went back to town, and Owen was left by himself at the Red Cottage. He had a bad half-hour, as soon as she was gone, with his accusing conscience. And, what was worse, the bad half-hour lengthened itself out by degrees into a sleepless night, in the course of which Owen tossed and turned, and got no rest for his poor brain, thinking feverishly of the Cause, and Mr. Hayward betrayed, and bleeding Russia abandoned to her fate, and . . . Ionê Dracopoli's sweet smile of sunshine.

Yes, try as he would, he couldn't get Ionê Dracopoli's pretty face out of his head for a minute. He knew it was wrong; but he couldn't help it. He was in love with Ionê, very deeply in love; but to what end could it lead? He was ashamed, himself, even to put the question.

For, as he lay awake there in his bed, running over his hazardous *rôle* in life, he was conscious of one wicked, one backsliding preoccupation—he thought most now, not of betrayal to the Cause, but of rocks ahead for Ionê.

That was, in truth, the very head and front of his offending. He loved Ionê; but how could he ever hope, even in the dim future, to marry her? He oughtn't to have allowed himself to give way as he did to-day; their lips should never have met; those last fatal words of avowal should never have been spoken. For Ionê's sake not for the Cause's; for this fresh Greek Circe was leading him on into a hopeless love affair. He could never marry anybody, he saw that quite clearly now. His

whole life was mortgaged. Just in proportion as he loved Ionê did the feeling grow stronger from hour to hour upon him that he could never ask any woman on earth to share his perilous fate with him. He must go through life with a halter round his neck; he must tread the crumbling ash on the brink of a volcano. Any day he might be called upon to strike that blow for Russia, and success must mean death—a felon's death, amid the hushed, half-admiring execration of all civilized Europe. For himself that was nothing; he had been accustomed to the idea in his own mind so long, and had heard its glories painted in such glowing colours by the man he most respected and revered on earth, that it had no greater terrors for him than the idea of active service has for the born soldier. But for Ionê—ah, that was different—how different, oh, how different! Could he expose her to such a risk, such a strain, such a catastrophe?

Happy, whole-hearted, easy-going English lad that he was, he had sat consciously without one qualm on a barrel of gunpowder.

For the very first time in his life, however, on his bed that night, Owen thought the whole thing out to himself, quite definitely and in full detail. Let him get into the diplomatic service, for example, and be engaged to Ionê. Suppose, then, the chance—that supreme chance of his life to which he had been taught from childhood to look forward with eagerness—should arrive during the years while he was still waiting for Ionê. He clapped his hands on his eyes, pressing the pupils hard, and pictured the whole scene to himself vividly, graphically. He saw it unfold itself before his mental vision in long panorama as it might actually occur. He realized his mission with intense actuality.

He stood in a ballroom at Vienna, he would suppose, or no, in a great hall of the palace at Laeken, on the hill behind Brussels, some early summer evening. Principalities and powers floated before his eyes, glittering with such garish decorations as the essentially barbaric royal mind delights in. Men in uniform clustered in groups with gay ladies in Court dress. He saw the glare of diamonds, the flash of scarlet facings. Aides-de-camp

and chamberlains jostled page and lackey. At one end embodied Belgium stood, awkwardly regal, with All the Russias by his side, among a tinsel throng of blazing stars and orders. Every gewgaw that makes majesty for the vulgar mind contributed its part to that brave show —dress, feathers, swords, music, the loud blare of the band, the dazzling splendour of electric light, the pomp of sewer and seneschal, the powdered cheeks and scented bosoms of beautiful women.

And through the midst of it all, as in a prophetic haze, Owen saw himself strolling calmly in his Foreign Office uniform — an alien element, tall, broad-built, contemptuous, looking down from his stately eminence of six feet two, as was his wont, on the surging mob of smaller folk around him. He crossed the floor again and again, with his easy gliding tread and a smile on his lips, stopping here to murmur a word or two in his purest Parisian to an ambassador's wife, or there to address a few guttural compliments to a high well-born countess or a serene altitude. Then, all of a sudden, a pause, a hush, a movement. All the Russias, star-bedizened, strides slowly down the midst, through a lane that opens deferential, spontaneous, automatic—a Queen Consort on his arm—there, before him, the enemy! . . . Owen stands by and sees the chance arrive. The victim passes close to him. Quick as thought, out with the sword—no tailor's toy, but a serviceable blade hanging trusty by his side—or else, still better, up with the avenging revolver from his waistcoat breast, and . . . crash . . . it buries itself in the tyrant's bosom. Then a noise, a commotion, a rushing up on all sides. Blood gurgles from a wound, angry hands lie hard on the avenger's shoulder. Owen lets the revolver fall and stands, arms crossed, smiling scornfully. Let them do their worst now. Russia is vindicated, and Justice has wreaked her will on the chief executioner.

He had seen that picture before—more than once in his day-dreams—but never at all so clearly. He had watched the man drop; he had stood so, bolt upright, tall, strong, calm, triumphant, conscious of right on his side, a willing martyr to a great Cause, looking down

with cold disdain on scared flunkeys around him. But never till to-night had he noticed so plainly blood oozing out of the wound, horrid filth on the floor, the terrified faces of pale women behind, the hateful physical accompaniments of a political assassination. He had thought of himself always till then as the central figure of the scene—avenging democracy personified and victorious. To-night he was somehow more conscious of his victim as well, and though he recognised the man still as a criminal to be punished without fear or remorse, he remembered for the first time in his life that even an autocrat is human, built up of red blood and warm flesh, as *we* are.

But that wasn't the point, either, that made him pause the most. You may wonder at it, of course; but consider his upbringing! It was Ionê he thought of now. What would Ionê say of it? Could he fancy himself so loving her, engaged to her, bound to her—yet committing that act, and bringing all that misery on her innocent head? For see what it meant! Ionê in London—Ionê walking down Victoria Street! A placard at the crossing, laid flat on the muddy ground! 'Assassination of the Czar,' in great, flaring red letters! She buys a paper, tears it open, then and there, all trembling. That laughter-loving face grows white as death; those plump hands quiver horribly. 'Owen Cazalet, an *attaché* at the English Embassy. Cause of crime unknown. Suspected madness.' She clutches the nearest railing with one hand for support. Owen caught and arrested! So that's the end of her cherished love dream!

And then, a long trial. Accomplices, principals. Mr. Hayward, of Bond Street, a Russian Nihilist in disguise, in correspondence with the prisoner. All the world looks on eager. But where's the glory of it now? Who cares for martyrdom, who cares for death, who cares for duty, who cares for Russia free—if Ionê sits white in the crammed court, meanwhile, waiting pale as a corpse for that inevitable sentence?

Execution! Triumph! And Ionê left miserable and heart-broken behind! Oh, why did he ever meet her? Why did he ever allow himself that day to be dragged into it!

Take hands, and part with laughter; touch lips, and part with tears. They two had touched lips, and this would be the upshot.

Or, perhaps, it might come later; for Mr. Hayward had warned him never to count upon the chance as certain, or to seize it prematurely, but to watch and wait with patience, till opportunity brought occasion pat round at the one apt moment. He might have got on by then, let us suppose, and have married Ionê. But how marry any woman with such a hazard as that ever vaguely in store for her? How jeopardize her happiness every day of one's life? How trust her, even, to keep the awful secret, and not interfere to prevent the realization of his purpose?

Mr. Hayward was right, after all. A woman's a delusion. Man should keep his hands free to do the work that's set before him. How serve your country or your cause if you know success must mean red ruin and the breaking up of home to your wife and children, or to the girl who loves you? Better by far keep out of love altogether. But then—he hadn't kept out of it. Ionê had stormed his heart; and even while his head told him in very clear terms he owed it to her and the Cause to break all off at once, his heart was beating hard to the recurrent tune of 'Ionê, Ionê, Ionê, Ionê!'

She was so bright, so lovable, so exactly what he wanted. And Russia was so far away, and Ionê so near him.

Then suddenly the thought came across him—the wicked, traitorous thought—did he really want to kill the chief criminal at all? Were it not better to stop at home at his ease, and make love to Ionê?

Appalled at the ghastly temptation, he sat up in his bed, and cast it from him bodily. He cast it from him, in the most literal and physical sense, with his two hands stretched out and his face averted. He cast it from him, horror-struck, with all the force of his strong young arms, and all the intensity of his inherited Russian nature. Get thee behind me, Satan! He rejected it and repudiated it as a young man, otherwise trained, might reject and repudiate the most deadly sin. Turn his back

upon the Cause? Prove treacherous to his nurture and admonition in the faith? Disappoint all the dearest hopes of those who had been kindest and best to him? Oh, Mr. Hayward! Mr. Hayward! Perish the thought for ever! In an agony of remorse and shame the poor lad flung it away from him.

Yet it haunted him still, that instigation of the devil! From all sides it haunted him. The turning-point of youth had come—the critical age of doubt, of deliberation, of reconstruction, of resolution. Russia—the burning wrongs of that tortured country; his father's blood, that cried from the ground like righteous Abel's for vengeance; his mother's fate, wandering mad through the streets of Wilna; the crowned and terrified abstraction that sat aghast, clutching hard, on its tottering throne—and, weighed against them in the balance, Ionê—Ionê—Ionê Dracopoli!

O God! for light, for help, for guidance! The young heart within him throbbed fierce with love. He rose and paced the room, and lighted his candle in his agony. A photograph smiled down on him from the mantelpiece in front—smiled sunnily and innocently. He took it up and kissed it with hot feverish lips. It was Mr. Hayward's portrait of Ionê in her Moorish costume. Mr. Hayward's—of Ionê! There stood, as in one magnet, the two opposite poles of his oscillating devotion. Ionê—Mr. Hayward; Mr. Hayward—Ionê.

Oh, Ruric Brassoff, Ruric Brassoff! you said truly that day on the Morocco hills, 'Love is a great snare'; and wisely, too, you said, 'Keep your head clear if you can, and let the Cause have the heart of you.'

But now Ionê Dracopoli had Owen Cazalet's heart, and the Cause—why, the Cause, as Owen would have phrased it himself, though it still had his head, was just nowhere in the running.

For it was no longer Russia, that bleeding, distracted country, that Owen balanced in the scale against Ionê's love; it was Mr. Hayward's aspirations. A cause, after all, is a very abstract entity, especially when you're only just turned one-and-twenty. But a person is a very different thing; and Owen loved Mr. Hayward. No son

ever loved and revered his father as Owen loved and revered that earnest, austere, single-hearted Nihilist. He admired him with all his soul. He couldn't bear even to harbour a thought that might displease him.

For Mr. Hayward's sake he must go on and persevere. He must . . . give up—O God! he must give up——

But no—not even in word—he *couldn't* give up Ionê.

And so, on the rock between love and duty, as he understood those two, Owen Cazalet passed a night of unearthly struggle. Every throb of his pulse, every tick of the clock, seemed to oscillate in unison with those conflicting claims: Ionê—the Cause; his own heart—Mr. Hayward.

One or other must go. What poor stuff for a martyr! He felt his own great limbs in contemptuous self-judgment. To think he could be so weak, who was bred for a Nihilist!

CHAPTER XXIV.

PALTERING WITH SIN.

NEXT morning, early, Owen tubbed and dressed, bathed his eyes many times to look as fresh as possible, and came down to ask for breakfast half an hour before the usual time. He was going to run up to town, he said. He'd like to catch the 8.50.

Aunt Julia glanced hard at him, all old-maidish suspicion. She was accustomed to these sudden shocks, to be sure; and the worst of it was, though she might doubt the reason, she could never interfere lest it might, peradventure, prove to be one of that dreadful man's sealed orders.

'To see Mr. Hayward?' she asked, hesitating.

'No,' Owen answered, with a fervent promptitude which at once reassured her mind on that score at least. '*Not* to see Mr. Hayward.'

After which he shut his mouth close. It was an odious way the boy had. He'd picked it up, Aunt Julia

thought, from that dreadful man himself. They were always so close, both of them, about their plans and their projects.

'Where to, then?' Aunt Julia ventured to inquire once more, after a long silence.

And Owen answered:

'To Sacha's.'

'Oh!' Aunt Julia replied.

It was the Oh argumentative and subinterrogatory, not the Oh purely assentative; it meant, 'What to do, or whom to see?'

But Owen took no notice of it.

So after a discreet interval Aunt Julia tried again.

'It's odd you should go up to-day,' she objected, 'when you saw Sacha yesterday.'

'Things have occurred since yesterday,' Owen responded dryly.

This was too much for Aunt Julia. She opened her eyes wide at that oracular utterance.

'How could they?' she exclaimed in surprise. 'Nobody's come or gone. Why, even the post's not in yet this morning.'

'Things may occur in the night,' Owen answered, somewhat gloomily; for how could he so much as speak of such high matters to Aunt Julia? 'The vision of my head on my bed, perhaps. . . . I want to talk certain points over, anyhow, with Sacha.'

'It isn't Sacha you want to see, Owen, I'm afraid,' Aunt Julia burst out severely, shaking one lifted forefinger. 'It's that other queer girl—the one that rides astride like a man, and frequents strange harems.'

'But I saw Ionê, too, yesterday,' Owen answered, smiling grimly, for he loved to mystify her. 'I wonder, if it comes to that, you don't say Blackbird.'

Aunt Julia drew back, almost shocked.

'Well, I should hope you'd have the good taste to say nothing to *her*,' she observed with dignity. 'Not only are her views extremely unsound, but there's insanity in the family, of that I'm certain.'

'Insanity in the family?' Owen echoed. 'Why, who told you that, Aunt Julia?'

The prop of orthodoxy sat up very stiff as she answered, with some warmth:

'I saw it for myself. The girl's mad: I'm sure of it!'

'How do you mean?' Owen asked again.

'Why, you remember one day last year Sacha asked her down here for lunch?—oh, no! of course, you were with Mr. Hayward. Well, we went out in the afternoon, and up on the knoll till evening. As we were sitting by the summer-house, and I was talking to her of her state, there was a very pretty sunset, and I saw to my surprise, the girl was crying. "What's the matter, my dear? Is your heart touched?" I asked her. And she answered, "Oh no, Miss Cazalet! I'm only crying because the sunset's so beautiful." Well, she must be mad, you know, before she'd talk like that. And nobody has a right to fall in love with a girl who has insanity in the family.'

'People can't help falling in love sometimes,' Owen mused, smiling again that grim smile. And Aunt Julia stared hard at him. 'Not that I'm going to fall in love with poor little Blackbird,' he went on quickly, seeing Aunt Julia's brow darken. 'There's not enough of her, poor thing! for one to fall in love with. You may make yourself perfectly easy on that score. I should never even think of her.'

And he went on eating his porridge in gloomy silence.

The 8.50 train took him straight up to Victoria, and ten minutes' walk landed him at the flat off Victoria Street. Ionê opened the door for him—she was the recognised housemaid. His heart came up into his mouth at sight of her; but he had made up his mind beforehand not to lean forward and kiss her; and he *almost* kept to it. The flesh, however, is weak. Ionê smiled at him so sweetly, and held her hand out so frankly, that as he took it the blood leapt to his face at the touch, and his heart beat wildly. Before he knew it, the man within him had done what he had sworn to avoid. His lips had touched hers, and he drew back all at once, abashed, ashamed, and penitent.

'Where's Sacha?' he asked, holding his breath. 'I came up to see her.'

'Ah, family affection,' Ionê answered, with laughing eyes, yet flushing red with pleasure. She took the kiss as her due, after yesterday, of course; but she was well pleased, none the less (as what woman wouldn't be?) that Owen couldn't rest one day without coming to see her. 'Sit down in the drawing-room here, Owen, and I'll run and fetch her.'

Owen followed where she led.

In the drawing-room Blackbird lounged lazily, as usual, in the long wicker chair, but still paler and whiter than her wont; while her eyes looked very red, as if from crying or sleeplessness. She rose as Owen entered, gave a distant little bow, and left the room precipitately. But the book she'd been reading lay open on the chair.

Owen took it up and glanced at it in a vacant sort of way, while Ionê was gone. He didn't observe it much, or pay any great attention to it. But the book was 'Maud'; and an orchid and a laurel-leaf were pressed at the point where Blackbird had been reading. The verse against which the orchid rested its petals was this:

> 'Oh, may the solid ground
> Not fail beneath my feet,
> Before my life has found
> What some have found so sweet!'

Owen knew the lines well, and remembered the something they spoke of was love. But he never troubled to inquire why Blackbird had been reading them. A most pessimistic poem, only fit to give poor Blackbird gloomier views than ever. But young life is self-centred. The verses brought back to Owen—just himself and Ionê.

The orchid, he knew, must be one of Henley Stokes'. And as for the laurel-leaves, why, Blackbird was always messing about, Sacha said, with laurel-leaves in the laboratory. She wanted to extract poetic inspiration from them, perhaps, for her melancholy music. At any rate, she was always distilling, distilling, distilling away at them. It was love and death. But Owen didn't know it.

As he thought such things vaguely, Sacha came in to him from the studio, brush and palette in hand.

'You've disturbed me from my model, you bad boy!' she said, kissing him affectionately. 'But never mind. I can see you've got something to talk to me about. Come into my sanctum, and I'll go on working while I listen to you.'

'But the model?' Owen objected. 'It's very private. She'd listen.'

'We can talk in Russian,' Sacha answered quickly. 'And that'll be very appropriate, too, for the picture I'm working at is that sketch I spoke to you of—a sketch suggested by one of Kennan's stories—"The Lost Girl in Siberia."'

'No!' Owen cried in surprise. 'How curious! How strange! Why, Sacha, that's the very sort of thing I wanted to talk over with you!'

'Not strange,' Sacha answered in her calm voice. 'Not at all strange, Owen—in me, especially. The Russian persists very strong in us both. And I was old enough to understand things, you know, when poor dear mamma——'

A sigh finished the sentence.

'The Russian persists very strong in us both!' Owen followed her into the studio. Yes, yes; Mr. Hayward had made it a religion to him that the Russian should persist, and the Nihilist, too. But was it really so strong? Or was it wearing out gradually?

In temperament, ay—he was Russian to the core, though with a very strong dash of English practicality and solidity as well; yet all Russian in his idealism, his devotion, his enthusiasm. But as to sentiment—well, more doubtful; his English training had made him in many things what he really was, and Mr. Hayward alone had encouraged the undeveloped Russian tendencies.

And now, since he knew Ionê, he felt more English than ever. He would have liked to settle down with Ionê to a quiet English life—if it were not for the fear of disappointing Mr. Hayward.

But to disappoint Mr. Hayward would be no light matter. It would be to blight the hopes of a life, to destroy at one blow a whole vast fabric of plans and schemes and visions.

He sat down in the studio chair.

Sacha explained to her model briefly that the gentleman spoke a foreign language, and she would work while she talked to him.

Owen leant forward and began.

Sacha, immovable as usual to the outer eye, stood up before her canvas, half facing him, half looking towards the model. The girl, scantily clad, cowered and crouched to keep warm in the imaginary snow. Sacha painted on, as if absorbed, while Owen spoke to her in Russian.

'You know what happened yesterday?' he began.

Sacha nodded, and put in a stroke at the child's golden hair.

'I could guess it,' she answered shortly. 'And, indeed, Ionê half told me. That is to say, when I teased her about it, she more than half admitted it.'

Then Owen explained the whole episode, in timid, bashful words, down to the very last touch about blowing up the Czar; and that, as in honour bound, he refrained from telling her.

But Sacha could guess it all the same, though she went on painting as if for dear life. She knew more than she said. Not much escaped Sacha.

When he'd finished she looked up.

'Well?' she murmured calmly.

'I've had a sleepless night,' Owen answered, stretching out his big arms and legs in an expressive fashion.

'Thinking of Ionê?' Sacha put in, though she knew it wasn't that.

'No; thinking of Mr. Hayward.'

For the first time the brush faltered in Sacha's steady hand, and her breath came and went.

'He wouldn't like it, you think?' she said quickly. 'It would interfere . . . with his plans for your future?'

'Oh, Sacha, you know it would!'

Sacha fiddled away at the golden hair still more vigorously than ever.

'I've never been *told* so,' she answered, after a short silent interval.

'But you guess a great deal, I'm sure.'

'Yes—perhaps incorrectly.'

Owen felt this was painful.

'Well, anyhow,' he said, floundering, 'you can understand this much, if I married Ionê, or even got engaged to her . . . well, it would hamper me very much in the work he intends me for.'

'For the diplomatic service, in short,' Sacha put in diplomatically.

Owen eyed her with a start.

No word of the real truth ever passed between those two; yet, even without speaking, they understood one another.

'Yes,' he answered very slowly, 'in . . . the diplomatic service.'

'On the ground that if . . . anything . . . ever happened to you——' Sacha suggested, her hand now trembling so much that she hardly even pretended to paint at her picture.

'Precisely. The diplomatic service, we know, is very exacting. One takes one's life in one's hand. And if anything . . . ever happened to me, what would one say to Ionê?'

Sacha's breath came and went. But she still pretended to paint.

'Owen,' she said slowly, touching each hair with a dry brush, and looking mechanically at the child, 'I've often thought of all that. And ever since I've seen how much Ionê and you were taken with one another—why, I've thought of nothing else. It's given me, too, a sleepless night. It would be terrible—terrible.'

'Then, you guess *all* ?' Owen asked.

Sacha bowed her wise head.

'Yes, all, I think. Everything. And it has troubled me much—even for *your* sake, Owen.'

'How do you mean?' he asked once more.

She looked across at him tenderly.

'It's hard to give up one's brother,' she said, faltering, 'even for a great and a holy and a righteous cause, Owen.'

'I suppose so,' Owen answered. 'Though, till now, I never thought of it. And even now, it's never of myself I think, of course. I'm too much of a Russian for that, I

hope. It's of Ionê, on the one hand—and on the other, of Mr. Hayward.'

'It would kill him,' Sacha said, clenching her hand as she spoke.

'If I refused to—to go into the diplomatic service?' Owen corrected himself quickly. 'But I'd never dream of *that*, Sacha. It would be wicked, unnatural.'

'I'm not so sure as to its wickedness,' Sacha replied, very white.

'Why, Sacha, you know I owe him everything.'

Sacha touched a hair or two with real paint.

'If I were you,' she said with decision, 'I'd talk it all over with the person most concerned.'

'Who? Mr. Hayward?'

'Mr. Hayward! No, no, my dear boy—Ionê, Ionê!'

Owen drew back, all alarmed.

'But—I'd have to tell her everything,' he said.

'She knows everything already.'

'How can you tell?'

'I feel sure of it. And she said so to you yesterday. I could see it in her face. Talk it over with *her* first, and then go and have it out with Mr. Hayward afterwards.'

Owen hesitated. In the night he had said to himself a thousand times he must never, never, never see Ionê again. And now, at the first shot, he was abandoning the citadel.

'Where is she?' he asked, faltering. Alas for the stuff a Nihilist should be made of!

'In the kitchen, no doubt,' Sacha answered. 'Go out there and call her.'

And Owen, all on fire, feeling a consciousness of wild guilt, yet a burning delight that he might speak to Ionê, went out and called her.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN AWFUL SUGGESTION.

Ionê, in her kitchen costume, was leaning over the fire, preparing the soup for lunch, as Owen entered. She looked up at him by the doorway with those merry, laughing eyes of hers.

'Do you know,' she said, pointing her remark with an impatient wave of her iron spoon, 'this picnicking sort of life's all very well for the East, or anywhere else you choose to try it out of England; but now the novelty's begun to wear off a bit, I'm getting to believe it doesn't go down in London. Even with Our Boys to help us, I really feel before long—it's a confession of failure, I know—but—we must engage a kitchenmaid.'

'You think so,' Owen answered, without paying much heed to her words. 'That seems rather like rounding upon one's principles, doesn't it? Putting your hand to the plough, and then looking back again.'

Ionê tasted the soup from her big spoon with a very critical air, and pouted her lips prettily.

'Well, there's a deal of backsliding about us all, I fancy,' she said with easy *insouciance*, pulling her kitchen apron straight—and how dainty she looked in it! 'You can't live up to anything worth calling principles in the world as it stands; the world's too strong for you. Individualism's all very well in its way, of course; but society won't swallow it. It isn't organized that way, and we must give in to the organization.'

'You mean it seriously?' Owen asked, now much interested by the curious way her observations came pat with his own thoughts. 'You begin to believe in backsliding?'

Ionê took down a dredging-box from the dresser hard by, and proceeded to flour the loin of lamb on the table beside her.

'Well, partly I do, perhaps,' she said. 'And partly I'm still of the same old opinion. You see, the point's this: You can't dissever yourself altogether from the

social environment, as Blackbird calls it; you've got, whether you like it or not, to live your life in your own century. It's dull, but it's inevitable. Now, when we first came here, Sacha and I'd got tired of the provincialism of living always in the nineteenth century, and we tried all by ourselves to inaugurate the twentieth or the twenty-first, or something. But somehow it doesn't seem quite to answer. The rest of the world still sticks to its own age most provokingly in spite of us. So *there* comes the difficulty. Of course, if everybody else did exactly as we do, there'd be nothing odd in my running to open the door with my sleeves tucked up and my fingers all floury, or in Blackbird's being discovered with a dustpan in her hand, down on her knees on the floor sweeping the drawing-room carpet. But the bother of it all is, as things stand at present, we've got to run both concerns side by side, as it were—we've got to be servants at home and ladies in society.'

'It's a tax, no doubt,' Owen answered, putting off an evil hour. 'You'd like to be free this morning. Can't I help you at all, Ionê?'

Ionê looked up at him with a merry twinkle in her eyes.

'Not in that nice black cutaway coat,' she replied, holding out her floury hands towards him and pretending to make clutches at his impeccable sleeves, 'unless you want the evidences of your guilt to be patent to every observer. They'll say, if you do, you've been flirting with the scullerymaid.' And she made just a tiny dab of flour on his cuff by way of solemn warning. 'You see, there it is again,' she went on, bustling about the kitchen as she spoke, with Owen's admiring glance following her round at every turn as an iron filing follows a powerful magnet. 'That's the crux of the situation. You can't help in a kitchen and yet wear the ordinary black clothes of London respectability. Even Our Boys, whose frock-coats are the mirror of fashion of an afternoon in the Park, put on long holland smocks in the early morning when they come to crack the coals and light the kitchen fire for us.'

'I suppose you're right,' Owen assented, sighing.

'It's hard to have to live by two standards at once; hard to move in one world, and belong by nature and sentiment and opinion to another.'

'That's just what you're trying to do,' Ionê cried abruptly, pouncing upon him with a saucepan.

Owen paused and reflected.

'I suppose it is,' he said pensively.

Ionê went on washing out the enamelled inside with vigorous dabs and scourings.

'Why, of course it is,' she continued with much spirit. 'You, even more than most of us. Almost everybody worth speaking of nowadays lives in one age and feels with another, some of us in front of our own, and some of us behind it. But *you* try to do more than that. You want to drive four systems abreast. For you'd like to live in two ages and belong to two countries—England and Russia, our century and the next; that's the long and the short of it.'

'I never told you so,' Owen cried, turning pale. He loved to take refuge in that saving clause. At least, it could never be said he'd betrayed Mr. Hayward.

'If women only found out what they're told, my dear boy, they wouldn't know much,' Ionê responded cheerfully, giving another twirl to the cloth inside the shining saucepan. 'But, seriously, you can't go on living this double life for always. It's not human nature. I lay awake a good bit last night, Owen'—her voice grew graver and softer—'and I thought a great deal about it.'

Owen's heart leapt up once more at those words. In spite of the flour and the saucepan he seized Ionê's hand hard.

'You lay awake in the night and thought about me, darling?' he cried, overjoyed. 'You really lay awake and thought about me?'

Ionê nodded and smiled.

'Why, of course I thought about you, you goose!' she answered. 'What do you think girls are made of? Do you suppose, after what happened yesterday, I was likely to fall asleep the very first moment I laid my head on my pillow?'

She looked at him so bewitchingly, with those soft,

round cheeks so shamefacedly red in modest surprise at their own unwonted boldness, that Owen couldn't help leaning forward and—just kissing her as she stood there. It was a bad beginning for a philosophical debate on the ethics of Nihilism. Ionê took the kiss sedately, as though it were but her due; yet she motioned him away with her hand all the same, as who should observe, 'That was all very nice in its way, no doubt, but no more of the same sort at present, thank you.' Then she turned to him suddenly, in a tumult of emotion, and nestled her fluffy head on his shoulder for very shame.

'Oh, Owen darling,' she cried with a burst, 'think about you? think about you? Why, I lay awake all night long and thought of nothing else but you—you, you, you—till it was light again this morning.'

Owen ran his fingers tenderly through that crisp loose hair of hers. Russia—the Cause! what were *they* to him now? Oh, Nature, Nature, why did you ever make women? These temptations shouldn't be put upon our frail masculine hearts. He hadn't even the courage to answer outright that he, too, for his part, had lain awake all night and thought of her—and Mr. Hayward. He could only press her sweet face with one caressing hand into the hollow of his shoulder, while with the other he ran his fingers through those silky chestnut locks of hers. He was enslaved by the tangles of Neæra's hair. And he murmured under his breath, 'Ionê, I love you.'

For a minute or two they stood there—Owen, tall, strong, and erect; Ionê nestling against him in her womanly self-abandonment. Then, suddenly, she came to herself again, and moved away from him, all remorse and penitence for too open an avowal. She ran across the kitchen floor, blushing hot in the face as she went.

'Oh, Owen,' she cried, 'what'll you think of me? But I couldn't help it—I love you so. . . . And I know what it was *you* lay awake and thought about.'

'What, darling?' Owen asked, following her up instinctively, and seizing her hand once more, as she turned her tingling face away from him.

'Why, you thought,' Ionê answered, pretending to be deeply interested in the saucepan once more, though her

quivering hands belied their ostensible task—'you thought—you'd done wrong in ever speaking at all to me.'

Owen gazed hard at her and winced.

'It's desecration to say so, Ionê,' he cried, taken aback at her insight. 'But—I did. I admit it!'

'I know you did,' Ionê went on. 'I saw it in your eyes when I opened the door to you as you came this morning. You thought that horrid Russian man would be angry if he knew, and that you ought to have followed his wishes, and never fallen in love with me.'

Owen drew a deep sigh.

'Not angry, Ionê,' he answered. 'If *that* were all, I think I could stand it more easily. But grieved, crushed, heart-broken—oh, I can't tell you how utterly and inexpressibly disappointed!'

'Only because you were in love with me, Owen,' Ionê said, a bit reproachfully.

'Ah, you can't understand,' Owen burst out, half despairing. 'And I can't even explain to you. I've no right. It'd be wicked of me—most wicked and ungrateful. You can't think how much it means to Mr. Hayward, my darling; you can't think how much it means to him—all his life-work almost. For twenty years he's lived for little else but the plan, which—well, which my loving you would upset altogether. And I daren't upset it. I can't upset it. . . . Ionê, you won't understand it, but I owe him so much! He's brought me up, and sent me to school, and supplied all my wants, and been more than a father to me. How can I turn upon him now, and say, "I love a woman, and for her sake I can't fulfil my engagements with you"?'

'And you mean to fulfil them?' Ionê asked, growing suddenly grave and pale, for she realized now to the full what those terrible words meant. 'You mean—to blow up the Czar, and be shot, or hanged, or tortured to death for it?'

Owen paused and reflected.

'I mean to fulfil whatever engagements I've made with Mr. Hayward,' he answered slowly and ruefully. 'And

therefore I've done wrong in permitting myself ever to love you.'

Ionê let herself drop on a wooden kitchen chair, and laid her head in her arms on the rough deal table. For a moment she had given way, and was crying silently.

Owen let her go on, just soothing her head with his hand for some minutes without speaking.

At the end of that time she looked up and began again quite calmly. The womanish fit was over. Her tears had quieted her.

'You're going quite wrong,' she said, with a firmness and common-sense beyond her years. 'You're letting a false sentiment of consistency lead you utterly astray. You're sacrificing your life and mine to a mistaken idea of honour and gratitude.'

'If only you knew Mr. Hayward, Ionê!' Owen put in with a deprecating gesture.

'If only I knew Mr. Hayward, I should say exactly what I say this minute,' Ionê answered fervently. 'Look here at it, Owen. This is just how things stand. You're an Englishman born as much as anybody. You had a Russian father—well, I had a Greek one. It pleases us both to pretend we're Russian and Greek; and so, no doubt, in inherited tendencies and dispositions we are; but for all practical purposes we're pure English, for all that. You're just a tall, well-made, handsome, athletic young Englishman. You care a great deal more in your heart of hearts about a two-mile race than about the wrongs of Russia—though even to yourself, of course, you wouldn't like to acknowledge it. That dreadful Nihilist man—I admit he's very clever, very dignified, very grave, very earnest, and he knows your character thoroughly—but that dreadful Nihilist man has got hold of you, and talked you over to his ideas, and stuffed your inflammable Russian head—for your head at least is Russian—chock-full of his bombs and his dynamite and his enthusiasms, till not even your wholesome English legs and arms will carry you away out of reach of him intellectually. But you know very well it's all a factitious feeling with you. . . . Mr. Hayward's at the

bottom of it. If Mr. Hayward were to die to-morrow you'd never want to do anything at all for Russia.'

'I hope I would!' Owen cried devoutly.

For was it not his religion?

'But so much, do you think?' Ionê asked with a quick thrust, following up her advantage.

Owen hesitated.

'Well . . . not *quite* so much, perhaps,' he faltered out after a moment's reflection.

'No, of course not!' Ionê continued, in a tone of feminine triumph. She was woman all over, which is another way of saying her transitions of emotion were intensely rapid. 'Would you blow up the Czar, for example, all on your own account? Would you lay a plot to explode him? I, for one, don't for a moment believe it.'

'Probably not,' Owen admitted, after another short pause of internal struggle. Somehow, Ionê compelled him to tell the truth, and to search out his inmost and most personal feelings in matters which he himself had long given over to Mr. Hayward's supreme direction.

'No, I knew you wouldn't!' Ionê echoed, looking across at him and drying her tears. 'It's only your father confessor that drives you to these extremities. You've given him your conscience to keep, and you never so much as take it out to have a look at it yourself. But you're a man, Owen, now, and your manhood compels you to reconstruct your faith. The question is, Do you or do you not believe in this movement so much that you're prepared to sacrifice your own life and strength—and *me* into the bargain—to Mr. Hayward's schemes and Mr. Hayward's principles?'

She spoke it out plainly. Owen could not choose but listen. It was treason, he knew—high treason to the Cause, and yet, after all, very rational treason. There was plain common-sense in every word Ionê said. Why accept offhand Mr. Hayward's system of things as an infallible guide to moral conduct in a world where so many conflicting opinions bear sway alternately? Was Mr. Hayward the Pope? Was Bond Street a new Vatican? But Mr. Hayward's money? And Mr. Hayward's kind-

ness! Must he be ungrateful and base, and betray his great benefactor, all for the sake of that prime stumbling-block of our kind, a woman?

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CRISIS COMES.

When you're in doubt whether you ought, as a matter of conscience, to marry a particular woman or not, I've always observed it's a dangerous practice, from the point of view of impartial decision, to take the doubt to that woman herself for solution. For either she cordially agrees with you, and, after many tears, endorses your scruples, in which case, of course, chivalry, pity, and a certain masculine pique compel you to fling your arms round her in a passion of remorse, and swear in spite of everything she must and shall be yours—and hang conscience; or else she differs from you and dispels your flimsy doubts, in which case, naturally, there's nothing on earth left for a man to do but agree with her and marry her. So that, let things turn as they will, your woman wins either way.

Now, this was precisely the dilemma for which poor guileless Owen had let himself in. All that autumn through, of course, he continued to argue with himself that 'twould be a grievous wrong in him to disappoint Mr. Hayward. Yet the more he argued it, the more possible such backsliding seemed to grow with each day. Depend upon it, there's nothing for weakening the hold of virtue on the mind like the constant determination that, in spite of everything, you *will* be virtuous. The oftener you declare to yourself you will never, never do so-and-so, the more natural and thinkable does the so-and-so become to you. And thus it was with Owen Cazalet. By Christmas time, indeed, he had all but made up his mind that sooner or later he might have to tell Mr. Hayward his faith in the Cause was growing distinctly feebler.

As for Ionê, she aided him greatly whenever he saw

her, in this terrible resolve—for to him it *was* terrible. She never missed an opportunity of pointing out to him over and over again that his zeal for Russia was, after all, entirely artificial—a delicate exotic, reared and nursed with difficulty on rough English soil, and ready to fade at the first chilly frost of our damp Western winter.

'You'd never have arrived at those ideas at all, all of yourself, you know,' she said to him more than once. 'They're nothing but mere reflections of Mr. Hayward's enthusiasm. It's natural enough in *him*, no doubt; he's a Russian to the core—to the manner born—and he's seen how the thing works in actual practice. Perhaps he's been proscribed, hunted down, ruined, exiled to Siberia. He may have run away from the mines, or escaped from prison. I don't owe him any grudge for wanting to blow up the Czar—I dare say the Czar deserves it—if he thinks that's the best way of clearing the board for a fresh deal, and especially if, as you say, he wants to blow him up out of pure brotherly love and affection for the down-trodden peasantry. I sympathize with all that very much, in a non-compromising sort of way, and at a safe distance. But that he should want to drag *you* into it—you, our own dear old Owen—that's quite another matter. You're as English as I am, you know, and, if it comes to that, a great deal Englisher. And you're a thousand times more interested in the champion sculls than in the wrongs of the Slav and the abominations of the Third Section. You'll never allow it, of course, but it's a fact for all that. The enthusiasm's pumped up; the athletics are genuine.'

Much dropping of water will wear away a stone. Ionê was really, in her heart of hearts, far too deeply in love with Owen, and far too terrified for his future, not to push her advantage hard every time she met him. Sometimes she was sad, too, and let him see the reason why. How could any girl help being sad, she asked, no matter how joyous or vivacious her nature, when the being she loved best on earth was going straight his own headlong way to a murderer's grave or to the mines of the Ural?

Owen strongly demurred to that ugly word 'murderer';

he said it was a question-begging epithet, inapplicable to the minister of a political sentence against a notorious criminal. But Ionê, having once discovered by accident how hard it hit him, stuck to her phrase womanfully to the bitter end, and made it do good duty as a mental lever in her deliberate operations against Owen's tottering conscience—for conscience it was, though not of the common stamp. There be creeds and creeds, and each creed begets its own appropriate moral sentiments.

Is it murder to shoot a Czar? Or should we rather deem it a noble act of self-sacrifice for humanity's sake? God knows: I don't; and with the fear of the Lord Chief Justice for ever before my eyes, I refuse to discuss the question—at least in public. These matters, I hold, are best debated *in camera*. I may even venture to say, *in camera obscura*. Poor Herr Most got twelve months for deciding the abstract point at issue in the second of the two senses above considered. Twelve months in gaol, my medical authority assures me, would be bad for one's health; and it would deprive one of the society of one's friends and family.

But to Owen, less well brought up, the struggle was a painful one. He had been taught to regard Mr. Hayward's opinion as the ultimate court of appeal in all questions of ethics. No Jesuit was ever more successful in the training of neophytes than Ruric Brassoff had been with Owen Cazalet's conscience. Whether it be right or wrong to kill one man for the good of the people, Owen at least was quite as firmly convinced by his whole early training it was his bounden duty to shoot a Czar, wherever found, as he was firmly convinced it was wholly and utterly indefensible to shoot a grouse or a pheasant. He had been instructed by those whom he most revered and respected that to take life in sport, be it man's or beast's or bird's, be it Zulu's or Turcoman's, is a deadly sin; but that to take life for the protection of life and liberty, be it a scorpion's or a wolf's, be it a Czar's or a tiger's is a plain and indubitable moral duty. No wonder, then, he clung hard to this original teaching, which supported for his soul the whole superimposed fabric of ingrained morality.

By Christmas, however, as I said before, his mood had begun to weaken. He wasn't quite as firm in the Nihilist faith as formerly. Still believing without doubt in the abstract principle that Czars should be shot down, on every possible occasion, like noxious reptiles, he was a trifle less clear in his own mind than of old that *he* was the particular person specially called upon by nature and humanity to do it. A rattlesnake should be killed, no doubt, by whoso comes across him—say in South Carolina; but are you therefore bound to take ship to Charleston on purpose to find him? Must you go out of your way, so to speak, to look for your rattlesnakes?

Yes, if you've been paid for it, brought up for it, trained for it. Yes, if the path of duty lies clear that way. Yes, if you've engaged yourself by solemn contract to do it.

'But you were a minor at the time,' objects Ionê; 'you didn't know your own mind. Now you've come to man's estate, you think it over at your leisure, and repudiate the obligation.'

Ah, yes; but how return, not the money alone, but the pains, the care, the loving interest? That was what bothered Owen now. The black ingratitude, the cruelty! Above all, how break his change of mind to Mr. Hayward?

From that ordeal he shrank horribly: yet sooner or later, he felt in his soul, it must come. He began to see that clearly now. He had passed all the Foreign Office examinations with credit, and had further been excused his two years of residence abroad, as his knowledge of colloquial French was pronounced to be simply perfect; and he was only waiting at present to receive his appointment. But how live in this hateful state? It shamed him to take another penny of Mr. Hayward's money.

Early in January, however, an event occurred which compelled him to hasten his decision one way or the other.

It was a foggy day in town. Black mist veiled all London. The lamps burned yellow. Carriages crawled slow through melting slush in Bond Street. The frost had paralyzed traffic along the main thoroughfares; and the practice of photography was suspended for the

moment by thick gloom that might be felt in Mortimer and Co.'s studio.

As they lounged and bored themselves, a lady came to the door, who asked to see Mr. Hayward. She was a lady of a certain age, and of a certain girth, too, but still handsome and buxom with ripe matronly beauty. The young woman with the tously hair, in the shop downstairs, passed her up languidly to the office. The young man in the office, twirling his callow moustache, remembered to have seen her before, and to have sent home her photographs to a private room at the Métropole. It was difficult indeed for anyone to forget those great magnetic eyes. Madame Mireff, he recollected, the famous unaccredited Russian agent. So he showed her up to the sanctum with much awed respect. Was she not known to be some great one, acquainted with peers, nor unfamiliar with royalties?

Mr. Hayward sat at the desk, writing letters or making notes, as Madame Mireff entered. He rose to receive her with that stately civility of his younger Court life which twenty years of English shopkeeping had never yet got rid of. She took his hand with warmth; but his very manner, as he motioned her gracefully to the big easy-chair, warned Madame at once of the footing on which they were to stand in their interview to-day. No more of Ruric Brassoff or of incriminating disclosures. She was a lady of rank; he was plain Mortimer now, the Bond Street photographer.

'Good-morning, Madame,' he said in French, leaning carelessly forward to scan her face close. 'How well you're looking! And how gay—how lively! That's lucky for me. I can see by the smile on your face, by this air of general content, by this happy expression, you've succeeded in your object.'

Olga Mireff looked radiant indeed.

'Yes,' she answered with conscious pride, 'I've been able to do something at last for our common country'—but she faltered as she spoke, for Mr. Hayward frowned. 'I mean, that is to say . . . for your young friend,' she added hastily, correcting herself, with that deep blush on her rounded cheeks that so well became her.

'Better so,' Mr. Hayward replied in a low voice. 'Better so, Madame Mireff. You know my rule. *Minimise the adverse chances.* One compromising interview is more than enough already. To-day—we are official.'

Madame blushed and looked down again. The presence of the great man made that woman nervous, who never quailed in society before wit, or rank, or irony, or statesmanship. She fumbled her muff awkwardly.

'I've mentioned your young friend's name to Sir Arthur Beaumont, who knows his family,' she said, stammering, 'and to Lord Caistor, and others; and I've brought pressure to bear upon him from his own side of the House, and, what's better at this juncture, from the Irish members. You know *ce cher* O'Flanagan—he's my devoted slave. I put the screw on. Fortunately, too, young Mr. Cazalet had fallen in with one or two of the patriots, and impressed them favourably as a friend and champion of oppressed nationalities everywhere; and they gave him their influence. So the thing's as good as settled now. Here's what Lord Caistor writes.'

And she held out in one plump hand the Foreign Secretary's letter.

Mr. Hayward took it, and read:

'Dear Madame Mireff,

'It surprises me to learn you should think her Majesty's Government could be influenced by motives such as those you allude to in making or withholding diplomatic appointments. Nothing but considerations of personal fitness and educational merit ever weigh with us at all in our careful selection of public servants. I am sorry to say, therefore, I must decline, even in my private capacity, to hold any communication with you on so official a subject. I am not even aware myself what selection may be made for this vacant post—the matter lies mainly with my under-secretary—nor would I allow Sir Arthur Beaumont to mention to me your *protégé's* name, lest I should be prejudiced against him; but you will find the announcement of the fortunate candidate in the *Gazette* at an early date. Regretting that I am un-

able to serve you in this matter, I remain, as ever, with the profoundest respect,

'Yours very sincerely,

'CAISTOR.'

Mr. Hayward put the letter down with a deep sigh of relief.

'Then he's got the honorary attachéship at Vienna,' he said, almost gasping. 'Nowhere else could be better. It's splendid—splendid!'

For those two knew well how to read and speak the diplomatic dialect.

Tears stood in the chief's eyes. He brushed them away hastily. Tears stood in Madame Mireff's. She let them roll down her cheeks.

'Have I done well?' she faltered timidly.

And Ruric Brassoff, seizing her hand, and pressing it hard in both his own, murmured in answer:

'You have done well. You have deserved much of humanity.'

There was a moment's pause. Then Madame rose and stood irresolute. Short shrift is the best rule in revolutionary affairs. She held out one trembling hand.

'That's all,' she said regretfully, half longing to stop, half fearing to ask for respite.

And Mr. Hayward, inexorable, taking the proffered hand, answered in his mechanical business voice once more:

'That's all. No further now. I shall write to Owen to-day. . . . He'll need two hundred pounds at once, of course, to enable him to take up so important an appointment.'

'You would . . . permit me to supply it?' Madame ventured to ask timidly.

The chief shook his head and smiled.

'Keep your money,' he answered, in a cold tone of command. 'I have no need for it now. Funds are plentiful at present. You offer too freely, Madame. When I require aught from any of you, rest assured, I shall ask for it.'

He rose and motioned her out with princely dignity.

For a second he held the door ajar, and spoke in English, audibly, as he bowed dismissal.

'I regret very much,' he said, 'we should have misunderstood your instructions. No more of the platinotypes shall be exposed for sale till we've altered the inscription. I apologize for our mistake. We'll withdraw them altogether, in fact, if you think them in any respect unworthy our reputation.'

CHAPTER XXVII.

OWEN DEBATES.

At Moor Hill next morning Owen was busy at his favourite winter pastime of boxing a stuffed sack suspended from a beam, when the postman entered. His room overlooked the garden gate, and his imaginary opponent dangled sideways to the light not far from the window, so he commanded the situation, even while busily engaged in his punching and pummelling. As a man of peace, indeed, Owen disapproved of boxing, except with gloves and muffle; but from the point of view of pure exercise, he delighted in the muscular play of it, and was an expert in the art, as in so many other branches of athletic practice. He had just dealt his swinging antagonist a vigorous blow between the eyes, which sent him reeling into space, when he caught sight from afar of a certain square blue envelope in the postman's hand of a most familiar pattern. He knew it at a glance. It was the business envelope of Mortimer and Co., photographers, in Bond Street.

In a tumult of expectancy he rushed down to the door, in jersey and drawers as he stood, his strong arms all sleeveless, and his brawny neck all bare, to Aunt Julia's infinite horror, on grounds alike of health and of modesty.

'You'll catch your death of cold one of these fine winter days, going to the door like that in bitter frosty weather.'

He took the note from the postman's hands and tore it

open hurriedly. Yet so deeply was respect for Mr. Hayward ingrained in the young man's nature that he laid the mere envelope down on the table with reverent care, instead of tossing it into the fire at once, as was his invariable wont with less sacred communications. As he read it, however, his face flushed hot, and his heart fluttered violently. Oh, what on earth should he do now? A bolt from the blue had fallen. He stood face to face with his grand dilemma at last. He must cast his die once for all. He must cross—or refuse to cross—his dreaded Rubicon.

'My dear Owen,' Mr. Hayward wrote, 'I have good news for you to-day, after long, long waiting. An influential friend of mine — one of our own, and most faithful—has just informed me your appointment's as good as made, the attachéship at Vienna. It'll be gazetted at once, so Lord Caistor implies, and probably by the same post with this you'll receive the official announcement. Come up to town direct, as soon as ever it reaches you, and bring the Foreign Office letter along in your pocket. I've placed two hundred pounds to your credit at once at Drummonds, Coutts and Barclay's, and have asked them at the same time to let you have a cheque-book. But I must take you round there when you run up, to introduce you to the firm, and to let them see your signature. For the rest, *attachés*, as you know, get nothing at all in the way of salary for the first two years; so you must look to me for an allowance, which I need hardly say will be as liberal as necessary. I can trust you too well to fear any needless extravagance on your part. On the contrary, what I dread most is too conscientious an economy. This you must try to avoid. Live like others of your class; dress well; spend freely. Remember, in high posts much is expected of you. But all this will keep till we meet. On your account, I'm overjoyed. Kindest regards to Miss Cazalet.

'Your affectionate guardian,

'Lambert Hayward.'

This letter drove Owen half frantic with remorse. 'Good news for you to-day'—'overjoyed on your ac-

count'—above all, 'in high posts, much is expected of you.' The double meaning in that phrase stung his conscience like a snake. Much was expected, no doubt; oh, how little would be accomplished!

'May I look?' Aunt Julia asked, seeing him lay the note down with a face of abject despair.

And Owen, in his lonely wretchedness, answered:

'Yes, you may look at it.'

It was intended for the public eye, he felt sure—an official communication — else why that uncalled for 'Kindest regards to Miss Cazalet'?

Aunt Julia read it over with the profoundest disapprobation.

'Vienna!' she cried, with a frown. 'That's so far off! So unhealthy! And in a Catholic State, too! And they say society's loose, and the temptations terrible. Not at all the sort of Court that *I* should have liked you to mix with. If it had been Berlin, now, Owen, especially in the dear, good old Emperor's days—he was such a true Christian!'

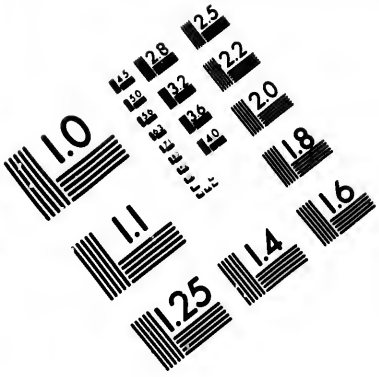
And Aunt Julia heaved a sigh. Vienna indeed! Vienna! That wicked great town! She remembered Prince Rudolph.

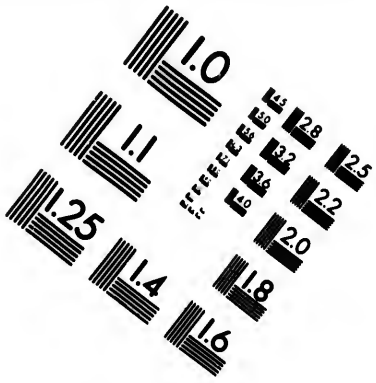
'It's awfully sudden,' Owen gasped out.

Wonder seized Aunt Julia. Though not very deep, she was woman enough to read in his pallid face the fact that he was *not* delighted. That discovery emboldened her to say a word or two more. A word in season, how good it is!

'And that certainly isn't the way a person of mature years ought to write to a young man,' she went on severely. 'Just look at this: "Live like others of your class; dress well; *spend freely*." Is that the sort of advice a middle-aged man should offer his ward on his entrance into life? "Dress well; *spend freely*." Disgraceful! Disgraceful! I've always distrusted Mr. Hayward's principles.'

'Mr. Hayward understands *character*,' Owen answered, bridling up. As usual, Aunt Julia had defeated her own end. Opposition to his idol roused at once the rebellious Russian element in her nephew's soul. And, besides, he





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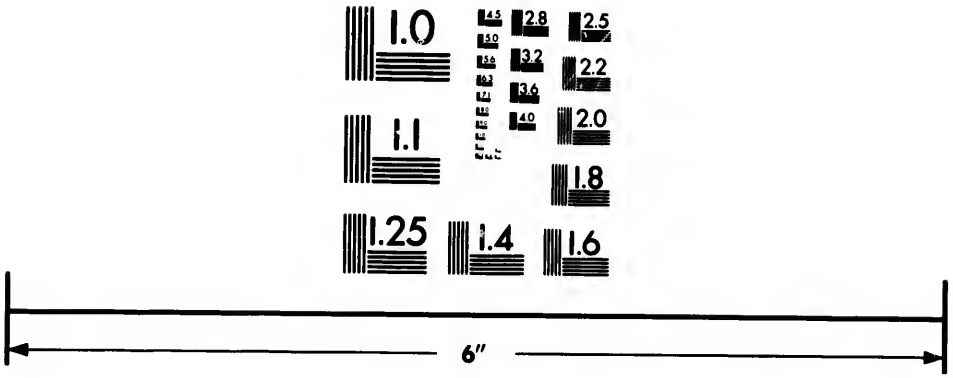

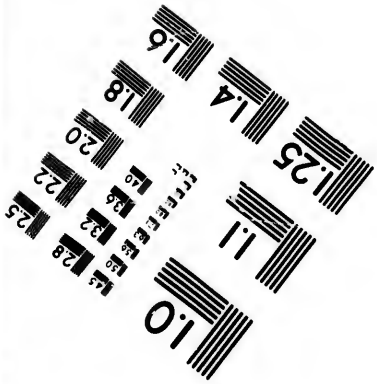

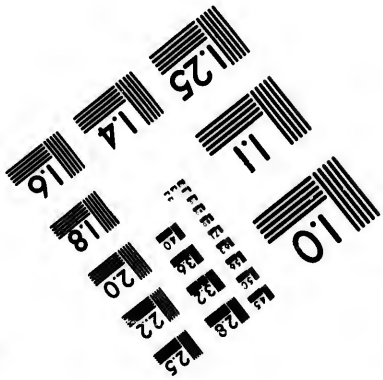

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knew the compliment was well deserved, that too conscientious economy was the stumbling-block in his case. 'I shall go up to town at once, I think, without waiting to get the official letter.'

'Mr. Hayward won't like *that*,' Aunt Julia put in, coming now to the aid of what was, after all, duly constituted authority.

Owen was too honest to take refuge in a subterfuge.

'I didn't say I'd go to Mr. Hayward,' he answered. 'There are more people than one in London, I believe. I said, to London.'

'Where *will* you go, then?' Aunt Julia asked, marvelling.

And Owen answered, with transparent evasiveness:

'Why, to Sacha's, naturally.'

On the way up, the last struggle within him went on uninterrupted. They were front to front now; love and duty tooth and nail. He grew hot in the face with the brunt of the combat. There was no delaying any longer. He *couldn't* accept Mr. Hayward's two hundred pounds. He *couldn't* take up the diplomatic appointment. He *couldn't* go to Vienna. Black ingratitude as it might seem, he must throw it all up. He must tell Mr. Hayward point-blank to his face it was impossible for him now and henceforth to touch one penny more of Nihilist money.

Owen had doubts in his own mind indeed, if it came to that now, as to the abstract rightfulness of political assassination. Time works wonders. Love is a great political teacher. As fervently Russian and as fervently revolutionary in conviction as ever, he was yet beginning to believe in educating Czars out instead of cauterizing them with dynamite. It was a question of method alone, to be sure, not of ultimate object. Still, method is something. Not only must the wise man see his end clearly; he must choose his means, too, with consummate prudence. And Ionê's arguments had made Owen doubt, even against Mr. Hayward's supreme authority, whether shooting your Czar was the best possible means of utilizing him for humanity. How much grander, how much more impressive, it would be, for example—to

convert him! That was a splendid idea. What a vista opened there! But Mr. Hayward? His heart sank again. Mr. Hayward wouldn't see it.

Arrived at the flat off Victoria Street, he didn't even go through the formality of asking for Sacha. He flung himself, full face, into Ionê's arms, and cried out in the bitterness of his soul:

'Oh, Ionê, Ionê, I've got my appointment.'

Ionê took his kiss, and started back in dismay. Her face went very white. She didn't pretend to congratulate him.

'Then the crisis has come,' she said, trembling. 'You must decide—this morning.'

Owen followed her blindly into the drawing-room, and handed her the letter to read. She took it in mechanically. Then she let her hand drop by her side, with the fatal paper held loose in it.

'And *what* will you decide?' she asked, cold at heart and sobbing inwardly.

'What *must* I, Ionê?'

The girl shook like a leaf in the wind.

'It's for you to say, Owen,' she answered. 'Don't let *me* stand in your way—or Russia's either. What am I that you should doubt? Why make me an obstacle? You may be secretary in time—envoy—minister—ambassador.'

'Or Russia's either,' Owen repeated, musing, and seizing her hand, more in doubt than in love, just to steady himself internally. 'Oh, darling, I'd have thought it treason even to think so once. But it's horrible, it's wicked, it's inhuman of me to say it; Ionê, for your sake, rather than cause your dear heart one moment's pain, I'd—I'd sacrifice Russia.'

'It *isn't* inhuman,' Ionê answered, flushing red in a sudden revulsion of feeling from despair to hope. 'It's human, human, human—that's just what it is; it's human.'

Owen held her hand tight. It seemed to give him strength.

'Yes, Russia,' he said slowly. 'I could sacrifice that; but Mr. Hayward—Mr. Hayward!'

'Obey your own heart,' Ionê answered; but she pressed his hand in return with just the faintest little pressure. 'If it bids you do so, then sacrifice me, by all means, to Mr. Hayward.'

'Ionê!'

He looked at her reproachfully. How could she frame such a sentence? Surely she knew it was duty, and, oh! so hard to follow.

Ionê flung herself upon his shoulder, and burst wildly into tears.

'Darling,' she cried, sobbing low, 'I don't want to influence you against your conscience and your convictions. But how can I give you up to such a dreadful future?'

Owen felt it was all up. Her arms wound round him now. Could he tear himself away from them and say in cold blood, 'I will go to my death, where duty calls me'?

That was all very well for romance; but in real, real life Ionê's tearful face would have haunted him for ever. Very vaguely, too, he felt, as Ionê had said, that to yield was human. And what is most human is most right; not Spartan virtue, but the plain dictates of our common inherited emotion. That is the voice of nature and of God within us. Those whom we love and those who love us are nearer and dearer to us by far than Russia. Supreme devotion to an abstract cause is grand—in a fanatic; but you must have the fanatic's temper, and fanaticism roots ill in so alien a soil as the six feet two of a sound English athlete.

He clasped her in his strong arms. He bent over her and kissed her. He dried her bright eyes, all the brighter for their tears.

'Ionê,' he cried in decisive accents, 'the bitterness of death is past. I've made my mind up. I don't know how I'm ever to face Mr. Hayward. But sooner or later, face him I will. I'll tell him it's impossible.'

'Go *now*,' Ionê said firmly. 'Strike while the iron's hot, Owen.'

The very thought unnerved him.

'But what shall I say about the money I've had—the schooling—the care?' he asked, pleading mutely for

delay. 'He's done so much for me, darling. He's been more than a father to me. It's too terrible to disillusion him.'

Ionê stood up and faced the falterer bravely.

'You oughtn't to let him wait one minute longer, then,' she said with courage. 'Undeceive him at once. It's right. It's manly.'

'You've touched it,' Owen answered, driven to action by the last word. 'If I've got to do it, I must do it now. Before the appointment's made. I mustn't let them gazette me.'

Ionê drew back in turn, half afraid.

'But your future?' she cried. 'Your future? We ought to think about that. What on earth will you do if you refuse this attachéship?'

Owen laughed a grim little laugh.

'We can't afford to stick now at trifles like *that*,' he said bitterly. 'If I'm to give up this post, I must look out for myself. I'm cast high and dry—stranded.' He glanced down at his big limbs. 'But anyhow,' he added, with a cheerful revulsion, 'I can break stones against any man, or sweep a crossing.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BUBBLE BURSTS.

On any other day Owen would have taken a cab to Bond Street. This morning he walked, though with fiery haste. For every penny he spent now was Mr. Hayward's and the Nihilists'. So it had always been, of course, but he felt it ten thousand times more at present. The dead weight of his past debt hung round his neck like a millstone. Not for worlds would he have increased it, as things stood that day, by a twopenny omnibus fare.

Mr. Hayward met him at the door of the photographic sanctum, and grasped his hand warmly. The pressure went straight to Owen's heart like a knife. If only he had been cold to him! But this kindliness was killing.

'Well,' the elder man said, beaming, and motioning

his ward into a chair with that princely wave of his; 'they've been prompt about the announcement, then. You got the official note by the same post as my letter?'

Owen's tongue misgave him. But he managed to falter out, with some little difficulty:

'No, it hasn't come yet, Mr. Hayward. I—I wanted to anticipate it.'

The chief's face fell.

'That was not in my orders, Owen,' he said with inflexible gravity. 'What a stumbling-block it is, this perpetual over-zeal! How often shall I still have to warn my most trusted subordinates that too much readiness is every bit as bad and as dangerous as too little?'

'But that wasn't it, Mr. Hayward,' Owen answered as well as he could. 'I had a *reason* for anticipating the official announcement. I desired to prevent the gazetting of the appointment. I may as well tell you all first as last——' He was shaking like a jelly. 'Mr. Hayward —oh, I can't—yet I must—— This is terrible.' He blurted it out with a gulp. 'I don't mean to go at all into the diplomatic service.'

The shock had not yet come. Mr. Hayward, gazing blankly at him, failed to take it all in. He only looked and looked, and shook his head slowly as in doubt for a minute. Then he ejaculated 'Afraid?' in very unemotional accents.

This word roused Owen Cazalet's bitterest contempt.

'Afraid!' he cried, bridling up in spite of his grief and remorse. 'Afraid! Can you think it?' and he glanced down involuntarily at those fearless strong hands. 'But I have doubts in my own mind as to the rightfulness of the undertaking.'

Mr. Hayward looked through him, and beyond him, as he answered as in a dream:

'Doubts—as to the desirability of exacting punishment upon the chief criminal?'

'Doubts as to how far I am justified—an Englishman to all intents and purposes, and a British subject——'

'In avenging your father's death,' Mr. Hayward cried, interrupting him, 'your mother's madness, your sister's

exile, Owen Cazalet; Sergius Selistoff, is *that* what you mean? You turn your back now on the Cause, and on martyred Russia?'

His expression was so terrible, so pained, so injured; there was such a fire in his eye, such a tremor in his voice, such an earnestness in his manner, that Owen, now face to face with the cherished and idolized teacher, and away from Ionê, felt his resolution totter, and his knees sink under him. For a moment he paused; then suddenly he broke forth, this time in Russian:

'Lambert Hayward!' he said, using the familiar Russian freedom of the Christian name, 'I *must* speak out. I *must* explain to you. For weeks and weeks this crisis has been coming on, and my mind within me growing more and more divided. I'm a man now, you see, and a man's thoughts rise up in me, and give me doubt and disturbance. Oh, for weeks, for your sake, I've dreaded this day. I've hated the bare idea. I've shrunk from telling you. If it hadn't been for this special need I could never, I believe, have made up my mind to tell you. I wish I could have died first. But I can't—I can't go into the diplomatic service.'

Mr. Hayward gazed at him still, riveted in his revolving chair, with glassy eyes like a corpse, and white hands, and rigid features. The change that was coming over him appalled and terrified Owen. He had expected a great shock, but nothing so visible, so physical as this. Mr. Hayward nodded his head once or twice like an imbecile. Then with an effort he answered in a very hollow voice:

'For *my* sake, you say, only for *my* sake, for *mine*. But how about Russia—holy martyred Russia?'

Owen felt, with a glow of shame, that in the heat of the moment he had wholly forgotten her. But he didn't wound his friend's feelings still more deeply than he need by admitting that fact.

'I would do much for Russia,' he said slowly, 'very much for Russia.'

'You ought to,' Mr. Hayward interjected, raising one bloodless hand, and speaking in the voice of a dying man, 'for you owe everything to her—your birth, your blood,

your fine brain, your great strength, your training, your education, your very existence in every way.'

'Yes, I would do much for Russia,' Owen went on, picking his phrase with difficulty, and feeling his heart like a stone—for every word was a death-knell to Mr. Hayward's hopes—'if I felt certain of my end, and of the fitness and suitability of my means for producing it. But I've begun to have doubts about this scheme for—for the punishment of the chief bureaucrat. I am not so sure as I once was I should be justified in firing at him.'

For a second the old light flashed in Mr. Hayward's eyes.

'Not certain,' he cried, raising his voice to an unwonted pitch—but they were still speaking Russian—'not certain you would be justified in striking a blow at the system that sent your father to the mines and your mother to the madhouse? Not certain you would be justified in punishing the man who sits like an incubus at the head of an organized despotism which drives the dear ones whom we love to languish in the cells of its central prisons, and wrings the last drop of red heart-blood daily from a miserable peasantry? An Englishman, you say, and a British subject. How can you be happy here, in this land of exile, while in the country where you were born people are dying of hunger by the hundred at a time, because a Czar snatches from them their last crust of bread and confiscates the very husks under the name of taxes? Is it right? Is it human? Owen Cazalet—Sergius Selistoff—you break my heart—I'm ashamed of you!'

Mr. Hayward ashamed of him! Owen bent down his head in horror and remorse. His friend's words went right through him like a keen sharp sword. For the worst of it all was, in the main, he admitted their justice. He, a Russian born, son and heir of a Russian martyr, nursed on Nihilist milk, fed on Nihilist bread, reared with care by the great head of the Nihilist Cause in England—how could he turn his back now upon the foster-mother faith that had suckled and nurtured him? If only he could have kept to his childish belief! if only he could have drunk in all those lessons as he ought!

But, alas! he couldn't. Take it how you will, no good Nihilist can be reared on English soil. You need the near presence of despotism in bodily form, and the horror it awakens by direct revulsion, to get the conditions that produce that particular strain. Such organisms can evolve in no other environment. Ashamed and disgraced and heart-broken as he felt, Owen *couldn't* have fired one shot at a concrete Czar if he'd seen him that moment.

He may have been right. He may have been wrong. But facts are facts; and at any rate he *couldn't*.

He gazed at Mr. Hayward in an agony of remorse. Then he hid his face in his hands. The hot tears ran down his cheek, big strong man as he was.

'Oh, this is terrible,' he said—'terrible! It cuts me to the heart, Mr. Hayward, that I must make you so miserable.'

The white-faced chief stared back at him with a stony pallor on those keen, clear features.

'Make *me* so miserable!' he cried again, wringing his numbed hands in despair. 'Every time you say that you show me only the more how little the Cause itself has ever been to you.' He seized his ward's hand suddenly. 'Owen Cazalet,' he exclaimed, gazing hard at it, 'listen here; listen here to me. For twenty years, day and night, I've had but one dream, one hope, one future. I've lived for the day when that great strong hand of yours should clutch the chief criminal's throat, or bury a knife in his bosom. . . . For twenty years—twenty years, day and night, one dream, one hope, one future. . . . And now that you break it all down with a single cruel blow—not wholly unexpected, but none the less cruel and crushing for all that—is it of myself I think—of my ruined life—of my blasted expectations? No, no, I tell you, no—ten thousand times no; I think only of Russia—bleeding, martyred Russia. I think how she must still wear the chains *you* might have struck off her. I think how her poor children must sicken, and starve, and die, and languish in gloomy prisons or in stifling mines, because *you* have been untrue to your trust and unfaithful to your promise. I think but of her—while *you*

think of *me*. Let my poor body die, let my poor soul burn in burning hell for ever; but give freedom, give life, give hope, and bread, and light, and air, to Russia.'

As he spoke his face was transfigured to an unearthly beauty Owen had never before seen in it. The enthusiasm of a lifetime, crushed and shattered by one deadly blow, seemed to effloresce all at once into a halo of martyrdom. The man was lovely as one has sometimes seen a woman lovely at the moment of the consummation of a life-long love. But it was the loveliness of despair, of pathetic resignation, of a terrible, blighting, despondent disillusion.

Owen gazed at him, and felt his own heart grow cold like a stone. He would have given worlds that moment to feel once more he hungered and thirsted for the blood of a Czar. But he didn't feel it, he couldn't feel it, and he wouldn't pretend to it. He could only look on in silent pity and awe at this sad wreck of a great hope, this sudden collapse of a life-long enthusiasm.

At last Mr. Hayward spoke again. His voice was thick [illegible]ard.

'Is [illegible]s girl?' he asked with an effort—'this Ionê Dracopoli?'

Owen was too proud to tell a lie, or to prevaricate.

'It is,' he said, trembling. 'I've talked it all over with Ionê for weeks, and I love her dearly.'

The chief rose slowly, and groped his way across the room towards the bell like a blind man.

'Talked it over with Ionê!' he cried aloud. 'Talked it over with a woman! Betrayed the Cause! divulged the secret! Owen Cazalet, Owen Cazalet, I would never have believed it of you!'

Half-way across the room he stopped and groaned aloud. He put his handkerchief to his mouth.

Owen rushed at him in horror. It was red, red, red. Then he knew what had happened. The strain had been too much for Mr. Hayward's iron frame. God grant it hadn't killed him! He had broken a blood-vessel.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BEGINNING AFRESH.

In a very few minutes a doctor was on the spot. Large blood-vessel on the lung, he said. It might of course be serious. Patient mustn't on any account go down to Ealing, where he lived, that night. Would it do, Owen asked, to take him round in a hansom to a flat near Victoria Street? The very thing, the doctor answered. Only carry him up the stairs. So in less than half an hour the phalanstery was increased by a new member, and Mr. Hayward found himself comfortably tucked up in Ionê's pretty bed with the cretonne curtains.

Oh, irony of fate! And Ionê was the Eve who had ruined Russia!

He remained there a week, and Owen stopped on with him. Ionê and Blackbird shared a bedroom together meanwhile; but Owen slept out at a house round the corner, spending the day and taking his meals all the time with the community. There was no lack of nurses, indeed. Owen himself was assiduous, and Mr. Hayward, in spite of his deep despondency, still loved to have his pupil and ward beside him. It pleased him a little, very little, to see that, even if Owen had fallen away from his first love for Russia, he retained none the less his personal devotion to his friend and instructor. Then there were Ionê and Sacha and Blackbird as well, all eager to attend to the sick man's wants; for strange to say, now the worst, as she thought, was over, Ionê felt no repugnance at all to the terrible Russian who had been so long her bugbear; on the contrary, in her womanly way, she really pitied and sympathized with him. And Mr. Hayward, though he regarded Ionê as the prime mover in the downfall of his life-long hopes, yet felt very strongly her personal fascination; so strangely constituted are we, so complex, so many-stranded, that, as he loved Owen himself, so he couldn't help loving Ionê too, because she loved Owen, and because Owen loved her. In the vast blank left by the

utter collapse of that twenty-year scheme of his, it was some faint comfort to him to feel that loving hands at least were stretched out without stint to soothe and console him.

As for Sacha, she had always respected and venerated Mr. Hayward almost as much as Owen himself did; on her he had claims of gratitude in many, many ways; she remembered him as the kind friend of their early days, the one link with her childish life, the brave ally of their mother in her darkest hours, the preserver who had saved them from the cruel hand of Russian despotism. And the grave, solemn earnestness of the man told also on her calm but profoundly impressionable Slavonic nature. Mr. Hayward, in fact, struck a chord in Sacha's being which no mere Western could touch. She felt herself akin to him by the subtle link of ethnical kinship.

On the second morning of his illness, when Mr. Hayward, more conscious now, was just beginning to reawake to the utter nothingness of his future, a ring came at the electric bell, which Ionê ran to answer. Blackbird was sitting just then by the sick man's bedside, singing soft and low to him a plaintive song of her own composing. It was a song about how sweet 'twould be these cramping bonds to sever, to lie beneath the soil, free from earth's care and moil, life's round of joyless toil, and sleep one dreamless sleep for ever. At that moment, on the last line, the bell rang sharp, and Ionê, who had been seated at the other side of the bed, holding her enemy's hand in her own, and soothing it gently with those plump, round fingers, jumped up in haste at the familiar summons to the door, and ran out to open it.

As she opened it, she saw a lady of mature but striking beauty, with large magnetic eyes, which she seemed vaguely to recollect having seen before somewhere. Then it came back to her all at once—Lady Beaumont's At Home—the Russian agent, that dreadful Madame Mireff! The spy! the spy!—what could *she* be wanting here at such an untoward moment?

In one second Ionê was a Nihilist full fledged. An emissary of the Czar come so soon on the prowl after

our Mr. Hayward (for she adopted him on the spot as part and parcel of the phalanstery). This was abominable, shameful! But she rose to the occasion. You must treat spies as spies; meet lies with lies; trump treachery with trickery. At that instant Ionê, born woman that she was, would have put off Madame Mireff with any falsehood that came handy, rather than admit to the Czar's agent the incriminating fact that they were harbouring a hunted and persecuted Nihilist. He might have wanted to send Owen to his death, no doubt; and for that she could hate him herself—it was her right as a woman; but no third person, above all a Russian spy, should ever get out of her, by torture or treason, by force or fraud, by wile or guile, the very faintest admission of Mr. Hayward's presence.

Madame Mireff, however, smiling her very friendliest smile—oh, how Ionê hated her for it, the serpent, the reptile!—handed her card very graciously to the indignant girl. Ionê darted an angry glance at it—'Madame Mireff, Hôtel Métropole.' At least, then, the creature had the grace to acknowledge openly who she was—to put the whole world on its guard against her as a Russian detective.

'Oh, Miss Dracopoli,' Madame said, in her softest voice, flooding Ionê with the light of those lustrous eyes, 'I recollect you *so* well. I had the pleasure, you know—Lady Beaumont's, you remember.' Ionê just nodded an ungracious assent, as far as that head and neck of hers could make themselves ungracious. 'Well,' Madame went on, divining her inmost thought, and still bent on fascination, 'I come to-day as a friend. You've no need to be afraid of me. I won't ask whether Mr. Hayward's here, for I know you'll tell me he isn't—I see that in your eyes; but will you take in my card and be so kind as to show it to everybody in the house?—for some of them, I believe, might be glad to see me.'

'There's no Mr. Hayward here,' Ionê answered boldly, looking straight in her visitor's eyes, and telling her a lie outright, with a very bold face, as any good woman and true would tell it in the circumstances. 'There's only ourselves—just the regular family. Miss Braithwaite

you don't know. And as for Owen and Sacha, I'm sure they never want, as long as they live, to meet you.'

It wasn't polite, but it was straight as a die, for Ionê's one wish was to keep the Russian spy from entering the premises.

Madame Mireff, however, sympathized with the girl's feelings too well not to be thoroughly prepared for this sharp reception. She smiled once more, and once more tried all her spells (in vain) on Ionê.

'My child,' she said kindly, 'you're mistaken—quite mistaken. I come as a friend. I ask for no one. I only beg you to take my card in as I say, and show it to everyone in all your household.'

Ionê hesitated. No harm in taking it, after all; indeed, till Mr. Hayward had seen it, she hardly knew what to do. But she wasn't going to leave the strange woman out there alone, unwatched and unguarded.

'Blackbird!' she called aloud, 'just come out here a minute. . . .' Then, in a whisper: 'Look here, stand there, and keep an eye on this dreadful woman. Don't let her come in. If she tries to pass you, throw your arms round her at once, and cling to her for dear life, and scream out at the top of your voice for Owen.'

Poor Blackbird, somewhat startled by these strange directions, took her place timidly where she was told, and kept her own eyes fixed on the large-eyed woman. Mesmeric, she fancied, the kind of person to send you into a sleep, a delicious long sleep where no Greek verbs would trouble your brain, no dreams disturb you. But Ionê, tripping scornfully in, carried the card in her hand to Mr. Hayward's bedside, and held it before him without a word, to pass his own judgment on it.

A wan smile came over the sick man's pale face.

'What? Olga, dear Olga!' he said, like one pleased and comforted. 'Show her in, Ionê.'

'But she's a Russian spy,' Ionê objected imprudently.

Mr. Hayward looked up at her with a white face of horror.

'What do *you* know about all this?' he asked sternly. 'This is treason. This is betrayal!'

Poor Ionê! The words came upon her like a shock of

cold water. She had been thinking only of protecting him; and *this* was how he repaid her. But even so, she remembered first her duty to Owen.

'*He* never told me,' she said proudly. '*He* never betrayed you. You betrayed yourself. I found it out, all by guess-work, that first night in Morocco.'

Mr. Hayward ran over with his glance that pretty chestnut hair, those merry frank eyes, and groaned inwardly, audibly. He had let out his secret, then, himself to babes and sucklings. He had betrayed his own cause to a girl, a woman.

'Well, I'll hear more of this some other day,' he murmured, after a short pause. 'It's all terrible, terrible! Meanwhile, show her in. I should like to see Olga.'

Ionê, all trepidation, went out and fetched the spy in. Madame Mireff, without a word, took the master's hand in hers and pressed it warmly. Tears stood in the eyes of both. What it all meant, Ionê knew not. But she could see at a glance both were deeply affected. And even when they began to speak she couldn't make out a word, for it was all in Russian.

'A bloodvessel, they tell me, dear friend,' Madame whispered, leaning over him.

Prince Ruric Brassoff sighed.

'A bloodvessel!' he answered with intense scorn. 'If that were all, Olga, it could soon be mended. No; ruin —betrayal—treason—despair—my life-work spoilt, my dearest plans shattered!'

Olga Mireff clasped her hands in silent awe and alarm.

'Not Sergius Selistoff's son!' she cried.

The despairing Nihilist gave a nod of assent.

'Yes, Sergius Selistoff's son,' he answered. 'In love with a woman.'

'And he refuses to go?' Madame asked warmly.

'And he refuses to go,' Ruric Brassoff repeated in a dreamy voice. 'He refuses to go. Says his conscience prevents him.'

'Has he told *her*?' Madame gasped out.

'I don't know. She swears not. And I think she speaks the truth. That's she that stands there by the bed beside you.'

Madame took a good stare at her. Ionê knew they were talking of her, though she couldn't make out the words, and she winced internally. But she smiled none the less her sunny Greek smile, and tried to seem as unconcerned as if they were discussing the weather.

'A fine girl,' Madame murmured, after surveying her close. 'Free, bold, Slavonic. The girl who crossed Morocco on horseback like a man. Greek, if I recollect. The right sort, too. Fearless, unconventional, independent, Hellenic. Good stuff for our work. She ought to be one of us.'

'She has ruined us!' Ruric Brassoff cried. 'And yet, for Owen's sake—Olga, it sounds strange—I tell you, I love her.'

'Couldn't we win her over?' Madame faltered.

The chief shook his head.

'No, impossible,' he replied. 'Olga, all that's a closed book for ever. I'm a ruin, a wreck; my life is cut from under me. I've no heart to begin again. I risked all on one throw, and the dice have gone against me. . . . Russia isn't lost. She will yet be free. But others will free her, not I. My work is finished.'

He threw his head back on the pillow. He was deadly pale now. Ionê saw something had moved him deeply. She lifted his head without a word, and gave him some brandy. It seemed to revive him. He held her hand and pressed it. Madame Mireff took the other. He pressed hers too in return.

'Dear Olga! dear Ionê!' he murmured aloud, in English.

And so they three remained there together for half an hour upon the bed, hand-in-hand, in mute sympathy—Ionê and the 'dreadful man,' the Russian spy and the chief of the Nihilists.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RULE OF THE ORDER.

For the rest of that week, Olga Mireff came daily and watched by Ruric Brassoff's bedside. As usual, her natural charm of manner and her magnetic attractiveness soon succeeded in overcoming all suspicious fears on the part of the little community.

Madame grew quite fond of Ionê, and Ionê of her; while Sacha, when once she had discovered the Czar's spy was a friend in disguise, could have done anything for her as one of 'dear Mr. Hayward's' admirers. Before the end of the week, though no secrets were told, no criminating word overtly spoken between them, they had all arrived at a tacit understanding with one another as to their common acquaintance. Madame Mireff in particular felt dimly in her own heart that Sacha and Ionê were fully aware of Mr. Hayward's being a Russian Nihilist, though they didn't specifically identify him with Prince Ruric Brassoff. And as Ionê was always kindness itself to Madame, now she knew her for one of Mr. Hayward's friends, and vaguely suspected her of being a Nihilist too, Madame Mireff got on with her as she always got on with everybody, after the first flush of prejudice against 'the Russian spy' had had time to wear off, and the real woman had asserted herself in all her womanly intensity.

As for Mr. Hayward and Ionê, they had had things out, too, between themselves meanwhile. And Ionê had made Mr. Hayward see that to *her*, at least, Owen had never betrayed him. She told that unhappy revolutionist everything; from the moment when she first said to Owen at Ain-Essa, 'The man's a Russian!' to the moment when, on the summit of the down at Moor Hill, she blurted out her intuitive guess, 'You've promised that horrid Nihilist man to blow up the Czar for him.' She made it all quite clear to him how Owen at first had tried to avoid her; how pure chance had thrown them together again, the second night at Beni-Mengella; how

she herself had made the arrangement to go and live with Sacha; how Owen had fought against his love, while she, recognising it, had brought her woman's wits to fight on its side against him; and how she had conquered in the end, only by surprising and telling out his secret. All this Ionê told, as only Ionê could tell it, with perfect girlish modesty and perfect womanly frankness; so that Mr. Hayward at the end couldn't find it in his heart to say a word of reproach or of anger against her.

'Tout savoir,' says the wise French proverb, 'c'est tout pardonner.' And if Mr. Hayward didn't quite forgive all—that were too much to ask—at least he understood it and in great part condoned it.

One day towards the end of the week, however, a ring came at the bell, and Ionê went out to the door to answer it.

'Telegram for Madame Mireff,' the boy said. 'Sent on from the Mettropoal.'

Ionê carried it in. Madame was seated by Mr. Hayward's bedside, with that rapt expression of joy Ionê had often noted on her speaking features. It seemed to do her good just to be near Ruric Brassoff—just to hold his thin hand, just to watch his sad countenance. She tore it open carelessly.

'From Lord Caistor, no doubt,' she said. 'He's so anxious for me to go down for their house-party to Sherringham.'

But even as she read it, a dark shade passed over her face.

'It's hard for a man to serve two masters,' she said in Russian, as she passed it across with a sigh to Ruric Brassoff. 'How much harder, then, for a woman!'

The invalid took it and read in French:

'Return at once to Petersburg. Most important news. Can't trust post. No delay.—ALEXIS SELISTOFF.'

He drew a deep sigh.

'You must go, Olga,' he said in Russian. 'This may bode ill for the Cause. We must know what it means, at any rate. Though it's hard, very hard. I'd give anything to have you with me in this my hour of darkness.'

Madame Mireff rose at once, and sent Blackbird out for a Continental Bradshaw. In half an hour's time she was packing her things in her own room at the Métropole. And by eight that night she was at Charing Cross, registering her luggage through *vid* Ostend, Berlin, and Eydtkuhnen to St. Petersburg.

'Madame Mireff—the Russian spy,' passengers whispered to one another, nudging mysteriously as she passed. 'Recalled poste-haste to headquarters, no doubt. Heard at the Métropole to-day she was sent for by the Czar at a moment's notice.'

Not that Madame Mireff herself had ever said so. The unaccredited agent disclaimed officialdom even more strenuously than she would have disclaimed the faintest suggestion of Nihilism. But when once you've given a lady the character of a Russian political agent, she can't move hand or foot without her reasons being suspected. She can't call on a friend without everybody's discovering in it some deep and insidious political import. Madame Mireff had left hurriedly for Russia that day; so the inference was, the Czar had need of her.

It was a cold journey, that bitter January weather, with the snow lying thick on the ground all through those vast level flats of the Baltic coast, past Berlin, and Marienburg, and Eydtkuhnen, to St. Petersburg. But Madame Mireff travelled on, day and night, unwearied, in spite of frost and snow, never resting for a moment till she reached her own house in the Russian capital. And she hadn't been home half an hour to warm herself before she drove round in her sleigh to the Third Section, where, still chilled from her journey, she was ushered up at once by an obsequious orderly into General Selistoff's cabinet.

The General shook hands with her warmly, almost affectionately.

'Hé bien, Madame,' he said, sitting down again, and twirling his gray moustache between one bronzed finger and thumb; 'how about Ruric Brassoff?'

Madame repressed a nascent start with no small effort. It was a critical moment. Was there some traitor in the camp? Had Owen let slip some unguarded phrase?

Had Ionê—but no. She recovered her self-possession almost before she had lost it. This was a life and death matter for her, for Russia, and for Ruric Brassoff.

'Not a trace of him,' she answered stoutly, in her most matter-of-fact tone. 'Not a sign of him anywhere. Though I've hunted high and low, I can learn nothing of his movements. I've mixed much with young men in England—hot-headed Radical young men—Cunninghame Graham and his kind—the sort of young firebrands who know Stepniak and Lavroff and Krapotkine and their like, and the openly avowed Nihilists of London or Paris—little idiots who talk foolishly, publicly, freely of the most secret designs; and many of them have confided in me; but I can't get hold of anything solid or definite about the creature Brassoff. He's in England, that's all I know, for letters arrive from him, and answers come within one post. But more than that, not a soul I meet can tell me. He must live underground, like a mole, they say, for no one ever sees him.'

General Selistoff eyed her hard. She quailed before his scrutiny.

'Yes, he's in England,' the bureaucrat answered; 'that's certain; and it's curious, chère dame, that with your intimate opportunities of knowing English interiors you can't track him down. It ought to be possible. But there, that country has no police; its *état civil* is the most backward in Europe. One thing alone we know, he still lives, he still writes, he still pulls all the wires, he still directs everything.'

'It's generally believed,' Madame went on, growing less nervous as she proceeded, 'that he's one of the group who compile those disgraceful and slanderous articles against Russia in the *Fortnightly Review*, signed E. B. Lanin. There's no such person, of course; Lanin's a mere pseudonym; and it covers, like charity, a multitude of writers. You must have noticed the articles, no doubt; your attention would be called to them by the official censors.'

General Selistoff nodded, and drummed with one hand on the desk before him.

'I've seen them,' he made answer. 'Most abominable

exposures. We blacked them all out in every copy that entered the country. And the worst of it all is, every word of it was true, too. The reptiles wrote with perfect knowledge, and with studied coolness and moderation of tone. I suspected Brassoff's hands in more than one of the vile libels. There were facts in them that could hardly have come from anyone else than him. But this is pure guess-work; why haven't you *found out?* You know the editor?'

Madame Mireff smiled a most diplomatic smile.

'Well, yes,' she said, 'I know him; but not from *him*. Oh, impossible! No use trying there. Incorruptible! Incorruptible!'

And she went on to detail at full length all the houses she had visited, all the inquiries she had made, all the wiles she had used, and how fruitless, after all, had been her diligent search after Ruric Brassoff.

'Well, but those children?' the General asked after awhile, with an ugly scowl on his face. 'Those children I asked you to track down, you remember? My unworthy brother's son and daughter? How have you done in the search for them?'

'Equally vain,' Madame answered. 'Well hidden away from sight. Not a trace to be found of them anywhere in England.'

General Selistoff leaned back in his swinging chair, puckered his brows, and looked sternly at her.

'But there is in Russia,' he said, crossing his arms, with an air of savage triumph; 'and *that's* what I sent for you all the way to Petersburg for.'

Madame's heart sank within her in an agony of terror. What on earth could this forebode? Had he tracked them himself? Must she be driven after all to aid him in hunting down Owen and Sacha?

For even if Owen was a traitor to the Cause, he was Ruric Brassoff's friend; and as to Sacha, Olga Mireff had learned by now to love her dearly.

The General turned to a pigeon-hole in the desk by his side, and drew out a bundle of papers neatly bound and docketed.

'See here,' he began slowly. 'We arrested last week,

in a suspected house at Kieff, one Basil Ossinsky, a chief of the propaganda among the students of the University. We had known him for long as a most doubtful character. In his papers we found a letter from London, in cipher, as usual, which I'll trouble you to look at. You will note at once, as you know the man's signature, that it's in Ruric Brassoff's handwriting.'

Madame took the inculpated document, and with difficulty avoided a gasp of surprise—for she read it at a glance—and it would have been death to her, or, what was worse than death, detection, if she had let Alexis Selistoff see she could read at sight the Nihilist cipher.

The General fished out a few more letters from his desk in the same well-known hand.

'Now, the point of all these,' he said, fingering them lovingly, 'is simply this: They show—what I could hardly have otherwise believed—that it's that incarnate devil, Brassoff himself, who has taken charge of my own brother's son and daughter, these degenerate Selistoffs. They further show that he's training that young fiend, in England or elsewhere, for some diabolical scheme, not fully disclosed, against the life and throne of our beloved Emperor. They show that he has long drawn upon his ignorant or venomous fellow-conspirators in Russia for funds to carry out this abominable project. They show that the scheme of the proposed crime was known in full detail to no more than four persons—Ruric Brassoff himself, Basil Ossinsky, and two others, unnamed, who are indicated, like the rest of the crew, by numbers only. But the devil of it all is, we've got the general idea of the scheme alone; for the assumed name and present address of young Selistoff, upon which all depends, was separately enclosed in a sealed envelope, not to be opened on any account except on the occurrence of a certain contingency; and this envelope, unfortunately, the man has managed to conceal; or, indeed, as we incline to believe, he has actually swallowed it.'

Madame Mireff breathed hard.

'And what was that contingency?' she asked, in almost tremulou trepidation.

'Why, it was to be opened in case the young criminal,

Sergius Selistoff, after having been trained for the purpose on Nihilist money, and inspired to the utmost by Nihilist friends, should suffer in the end from qualms of conscience —should refuse at the last moment to carry out the terms of his infamous bargain. Supposing that contingency to occur, it became the sworn duty of the three confidants of Ruric Brassoff's secret to break the sealed envelopes and disclose Sergius Selistoff's assumed name and identity. And they were further bound by a solemn oath, all three of them alike, with Ruric Brassoff as well, and the whole conspiracy at their backs, to hound down that young rascal to his death, by fire, water, or dynamite, and never to rest for a moment till they or he were dead, in the effort to punish him for his breach of discipline.'

Madame Mireff's blood ran cold.

'I see,' she said faintly. 'They're dreadful people, these Nihilists. No faith, no honour. The sort of things they do really frighten and appal one.'

General Selistoff leaned back and twirled his gray moustache with those bronzed fingers once more. As a military martinet, he almost sympathized himself with this bloodthirsty regulation.

'Well, in politics,' he said slowly, 'we can none of us afford to be over particular about the choice of our means. Politics, as I've often said, have a morality of their own. I don't blame people for trying to enforce order in their own ranks. It's just what we do ourselves. . . . I shan't mind though, if only we can catch this young Sergius Selistoff. . . . As a Russian subject, we ought to be able to get hold of him somehow. Extradition, no doubt, on a charge of common conspiracy, would succeed in doing it. It's a very good clue. We must follow it up incessantly.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

SHADOWS OF COMING EVIL.

In England, meanwhile, Mr. Hayward grew slowly better. In spite of the great weight on his mind—a weight of despair and of doubt for the future which he didn't

attempt to conceal—his health improved by degrees under Sacha's and Ionê's careful nursing. Blackbird, indeed, sometimes soothed him with congenial pessimism. There were no fresh green laurel-leaves now for her to pursue her chemical investigations upon; so the poor child turned her energies (such as they were) to the equally congenial task of suggesting to Mr. Hayward the immense advantages of annihilation over continued existence.

'If only you could die,' she said to him more than once, 'how happy you would be. And how happy I would be if only I could go with you.'

Notwithstanding these gloomy vaticinations, however, Mr. Hayward, strange to say, got gradually better. He was even carried out into the drawing-room, where Blackbird played and sang to him sweet songs of despair, and where Trevor Gardener and Henley Stokes were in time permitted to pay their respects to the mysterious stranger. Day by day his strength returned, though his cheeks were now pale and his eyes horribly sunken. It was clear the disappointment had shaken the foundations of the man's very being, both bodily and spiritual. His aim in life was gone. He had nothing to do now but brood over his lost hopes, and face the problem of the future for Owen Cazalet.

How serious that problem was he alone had any conception. He had woven a cunning plot against Owen's life, and now that he loved him well and fain would save him, why, the plot would go on by itself in spite of him.

As he grew stronger he seemed to lean more and more every day for support on Ionê Dracopoli. 'Dear Ionê,' he called her; and Ionê herself, now that her native charm had conquered so much initial prejudice and such obvious disinclination, was ready to his beck and call whenever he wanted to move his chair, or to draw nearer the fire, or to sit in the rare winter sun, or to lie down at full length on the sofa by the mantel-piece. She could read to him, too, in French or German; and Mr. Hayward, who, like most other Continentals, cared little for English books, was soothed by her correct accent and her easy, fluent utterance. Often he grasped her hand fondly as she led him into his room at nights, and, leaning over

to kiss it with his stately old-fashioned courtesy, he murmured more than once, with a very deep-drawn sigh:

'Ah, Ionê, if ever our Owen could have married at all, you're just the sort of girl I should have wished him to marry. . . . If only he'd been mine and his own, that is to say; if only he'd been mine and his own—not Russia's!'

Ionê noticed, however, that he always spoke thus in the past tense, as of set purpose, as if Owen's life and his own had been cut short abruptly.

At last he was convalescent, as much as ever he could hope to be, he said bitterly to Ionê, for he never expected to be happy or bright again now; all *that* was done with, all *that* was cut from under him. But he was well enough, anyhow, to move, and go off on his own account. And go off he would, alone; for he had to make new plans, as things stood at present—serious plans, difficult plans—for Owen's future.

And Owen's future, indeed, had been most seriously upset; for the appointment had come from Lord Caistor, as Madame Mireff anticipated, and Owen, feeling it impossible now ever to take it up, had promptly replied by refusing it and withdrawing his name from the list of candidates for the diplomatic service. Another man had been substituted for him, so *that* chance was gone for ever; indeed, Owen knew he must now earn his own livelihood somehow in a far humbler sphere. Luxuries like the Foreign Office posts were no longer for him. It was a question henceforth of eighty pounds a year and a humble clerkship. So he was looking about, vaguely, for something to do, though the awful weight of the despair he had brought on his venerated friend bowed him down to the very ground with pain and sorrow.

His plans were cut short, however, by a mysterious occurrence.

One morning suddenly, as they sat in the kitchen together for company, Sacha engaged in sketching Mr. Hayward's profile, and Ionê bustling about with the chicken for dinner, Mr. Hayward looked up, as with an inspiration, and said in a very quiet tone:

'I feel much better to-day. I think this afternoon I shall go off to the country.'

Both Sacha and Ionê gave a quick start of astonishment.

'To the country, Mr. Hayward!' Ionê cried. 'Oh, what for, you dear old thing? Just at the very minute, too, we were beginning to think we were really some kind of use and comfort to you.'

Mr. Hayward smiled sadly.

'Perhaps I'm getting too fond of you all,' he answered, with a faint effort at lightness. But it was a lightness of a grave and very pensive sort. 'Perhaps I'm beginning to regret my bachelorhood and my loneliness. Perhaps it makes me think I've done wrong, for my own happiness, to have remained celibate as I did, for an abstract principle's sake, instead of surrounding myself with friends, wife, children, family—and bringing up two dear daughters like you and Sacha.'

'No, no,' Sacha said quietly, with that deep Slavonic enthusiasm of hers. 'You chose the better part, Mr. Hayward, and it shall not be taken away from you. Though your plans have failed, you have at least the glory and the recompense of knowing you have lived and suffered for them.'

Ionê felt in her heart *she* couldn't have spoken like that; but she did what she could. She took the unhappy man's hand in her own, and stroked it tenderly, as she said, with almost filial affection:

'But you won't go away from us so suddenly, or so soon, dear Mr. Hayward!'

Mr. Hayward laid one caressing palm on the crisp chestnut curls. Olga Mireff would have given her right hand for that fatherly caress.

'Yes, my child,' he said softly, in a tone of infinite regret. 'I've many things to arrange. I must think out a new life for myself—and Owen.'

'Why not think it out here?' Ionê asked boldly.

Mr. Hayward shook his head.

'You don't understand these things, dear daughterkin,' he answered, still fondling those soft curls, but with a very pained look. 'Impossible, impossible. I must go down into the country for a while. Rest—peace—change—leisure. I must tear myself away from you all. I

must put space between us. Here, with *you* by my side, I can't make up my mind to what is, after all, inevitable.'

A vague foreboding of evil seized Ionê's soul. A lump rose in her throat. Till that moment she had supposed all was really over. The crisis was past; Owen had told him the worst; Mr. Hayward had had his bad half-hour by himself, and had happily outlived it. They might begin to think by this time they had turned the corner. They might begin to hope at last for a prosperous voyage in quieter waters.

But now, this mysterious remark of Mr. Hayward's set Ionê trembling. Profound anxiety seized her. What on earth could it be that he couldn't bring himself to do while she and Sacha were beside him? Was some terrible penalty attached, then, to Owen's defection? Could these Nihilists mean—but no! that dear, gentle old man could never dream of such wickedness! He loved Owen so much—you could see that at a glance. He was disappointed, crushed, broken, but in no way angry.

Indeed, as Ionê had noticed from the first moment to the last, since he came to the flat, Mr. Hayward's manner to Owen had been tenderly affectionate. No father could have spoken with more gentleness and love to an erring child; no mother could have borne a cruel disappointment more bravely or more patiently.

That very afternoon, however, true to his word, Mr. Hayward went away without further warning. Ionê helped him pack his portmanteau. As he talked to her meanwhile, the vague presentiment of coming evil in the girl's frightened soul grew deeper and deeper. Gradually it dawned upon her that their troubles, far from being finished, were hardly half-way through. Mr. Hayward's curious reticence struck terror even into that joyous and exuberant nature. Where would he stay? Well, as yet, he said, he really didn't know. He was going away somewhere—in the country—indefinite. He must look about for a place that would suit his purpose. What purpose? Ah, so far, he could hardly say. It must depend upon chance, upon suggestion, upon circumstances. But when his portmanteau was packed, he

seized Ionê's hand in a sort of transport, and pressed it hard between his own.

'My child!' he cried in a broken voice, giving way all at once, 'oh, my child, my dear daughter, I thank you so much for your goodness, your sympathy! You've been kind to a wounded soul. You've been tender to a bruised reed. Your smile has been sunshine to me in the wreck of my life, my hopes, my day-dream. How can I repay you thus? It goes to my heart to think I must requite you so cruelly.'

The lump rose in Ionê's throat once more. What on earth could he mean by it?

'Requite me? How? Why?' she asked with a terrible sinking.

Mr. Hayward's voice quivered.

'Never mind, dear daughter,' he said, and he kissed her white forehead. 'I've loved Owen well, and you too, very dearly—at first for Owen's sake, but now for your own also, and for your loving kindness. But I have no choice in this affair. I'm not my own master. Others are more bound to it than even I. . . . I'll spare him all I can. . . . I'll try to make it easy for him.'

In some dim, despairing way Ionê half guessed what he meant.

'Then it's not all over yet?' she cried, drawing back with a look of horror.

'All over!' the Nihilist chief answered in a tone of the utmost despair. 'All over, my dearest daughter? Oh, you can't mean that! Why it's only beginning!'

And seizing her plump face between his two hands, and bending down to kiss her lips with one fervent kiss, he rushed out wildly into the hall, and downstairs to the hansom, not even daring to say good-bye to Owen and Sacha.

Ionê burst into tears and hurried back to her own bedroom.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GOOD-BYE.

After Mr. Hayward's hurried departure, a period of dulness brooded over the flat. The old excitement of his illness was over for the moment; and the new excitement, at which he had hinted so strangely and mysteriously to Ionê, hadn't yet come on. So the members of the phalanstery mooned listlessly about at their daily work. Sacha painted without spirit; Blackbird composed without inspiration; Ionê mixed puddings without a touch of the divine afflatus of heaven-born cookery. She hardly even dared to tell Owen himself what Mr. Hayward had said to her. She locked it all up, terrified, in the recesses of her bosom.

Owen's return to Moor Hill, too, left the flat all the lonelier. He had no cause to remain any longer in London as things now went; he didn't want to sponge on Sacha and the girls, though, to be sure, the alternative was sponging on Aunt Julia. But the Red Cottage had always seemed to him so much of a home that he felt less like an intruder there than in Sacha's chambers. So to Moor Hill he retired for the present, deeply engaged in thought as to where to turn and how to look about him at this crisis for an honest livelihood.

The difficulty, indeed, was great and pressing. Honest livelihoods are scarce in this crowded mart of ours. And Owen had received no special or technical training. Having no University degree, the sordid shift of schoolmastering—the last refuge of the destitute—was closed against him. He waited and wondered what course to pursue. To say the truth, the diplomatic service is so gentlemanly and so distinguished a pursuit, that preparation for it seemed to have shut all other doors against him.

He had not long to wait, however. On the fourth morning after his return to Moor Hill the post brought him a letter in a well-known handwriting. Owen tore it open with impatience. His respect and veneration for

Mr. Hayward were still so intense that he read his guardian's letters with positive reverence. This one contained two distinct enclosures. The first was a formal note, with nothing compromising in it of any sort, dated from a little village up the river beyond Oxford, and inviting Owen to run down there for a week's rest and a little boating. (Strange season for boating, Owen thought to himself parenthetically.) They could talk over the subject of his future together, the letter said, not unkindly, after the change of plans necessitated by his determination not on any terms to accept the Vienna appointment.

The second note, marked 'Strictly private,' was of a very different tenour:

'My dear Owen,

'Both as your guardian, and as your Chief, I ask you—nay, I order you—to come down here at once to the lodgings I am staying in. I don't attempt to conceal from you the gravity of the circumstances. This crisis is a serious one. Further particulars you will learn from me immediately on your arrival. Meanwhile, show the present letter to nobody on any account—above all, not to Ionê. Leave the other one, which accompanies it, and which is sent as a blind, openly displayed on your study table. But bring this with you, and return it to me here. I will then destroy it myself, in order that I may make sure it has been really got rid of. Come without fail by to-morrow evening, and say nothing to either Miss Cazalet, Sacha, Ionê, or Blackbird about this matter. You may tell your aunt casually, if you like, you're coming down here to me; but I advise you not to go near Victoria Street in the present juncture. My boy, my boy, I would have spared you if I could; but I can't—oh, I can't! I'm utterly powerless.

'In profound distress,

'Your ever affectionate and heartbroken guardian,

'Lambert Hayward.'

Owen turned the letter over with a dismal foreboding of evil. He knew no small misfortune could make Mr. Hayward write with so much gravity as that. Some

terrible necessity must be spurring him on. Still, Owen's sense of discipline and obedience was as implicit as ever—or nearly as implicit. Without a moment's delay he handed Aunt Julia the letter intended for the public eye.

'I must go down to him, of course,' he said, suppressing his alarm. 'He's immensely disappointed about my giving up Vienna—on conscientious grounds, which I haven't fully explained to you—and I must go at once and talk things over in full with him. Poor dear Mr. Hayward! He looked so weak and ill when he left London the other day, that I shall be glad to get down with him and see if he wants any further nursing.'

Aunt Julia acquiesced. That phrase, conscientious grounds, had a mollifying effect upon her. It was a shibboleth, indeed, which Aunt Julia understood, and which appealed to her as an outward and visible sign of the very best principles.

'You should go, dear,' she said—the unwonted 'dear' being extorted from her in token of complete approval. 'To visit the poor man in his sickness—especially after all his marked kindness to you in the past—is a Christian duty.'

Owen rose from the breakfast-table as soon as he was finished, and packed his portmanteau. It was a little difficult to do, for his arm was sprained—he had hurt it badly two days before in one of his athletic bouts; but he went through with the task manfully. Then he started up to town by an early train, though he didn't mean to reach Oxfordshire till the winter evening.

His sense of discipline, I said, was *almost*—but not quite—as implicit as ever; for when he got to Victoria he didn't drive straight across town to Paddington, as one might naturally have expected; he put his portmanteau in the cloak-room instead, and walked with a burning heart down the street to Sacha's. That was against orders, to be sure; but the crisis was so grave! Instinctively Owen felt he might never again see Ionê in this world; and he couldn't go to his grave, if his grave it must be, without saying good-bye to her.

Even so, however, he was faithful in essentials to Mr.

Hayward. He saw Ionê in the drawing-room for ten minutes alone before he left the flat; but he never told her a word of where he was going, or what Mr. Hayward had written to him. He merely mentioned offhand, in a very careless tone, that he was on his way down to Oxfordshire to stop with Mr. Hayward and talk things over. Something must be done, of course, about his future life—something about the repayment of all the money spent upon him.

So Owen, faltering. But Ionê, for her part, read the truth more deeply. She clung about him, like one panic-stricken, and held him tight, and wept over him. She knew what it all meant, she was sure, though but very vaguely. Mr. Hayward's own hints had told her far too much.

'My darling,' she cried in terror, 'my darling, you will never come back to me!'

Owen, holding his wounded right arm away from her, soothed her tenderly with his left.

'Ionê,' he said, bending low to her, 'if I never come back, I shall have known at least the best thing on this earth—to love, and be loved by, a pure, good woman. I shan't have missed in life what life has best worth giving.'

The poor girl clung to him tighter still.

'Oh, how cruel!' she cried through her tears. 'Think of his dragging you away from me like this. And I nursed him so tenderly! Why, Owen, if only I'd known it, I'd have wished him dead instead a thousand times over. If I'd imagined he'd be so wicked, I almost think I could have poisoned him.'

Owen unwound her arms gently.

'I must go soon,' he said; 'I mustn't stop; and, Ionê, for my sake, you won't let it be seen you suspect or expect anything?'

'I can't help it!' Ionê exclaimed, breaking down once more and sobbing. 'How can I help it, darling? How can I help it? I *can't* let you go! I must tell the police! I must rouse all the world! I must come after you and prevent him!'

Shame made Owen's face red. He took her hand very firmly.

'My child,' he said, looking reproachfully at her, like a Nihilist that he was, 'I've disobeyed orders in coming to see you at all; and I disobeyed them because I said to myself, "I can't go without at least kissing her dear lips once more and saying good-bye, if good-bye it must be, to her. And I'll risk the disobedience, because I know she's brave, and she won't break down, or stop me, or betray me. I'll show Mr. Hayward a woman's love doesn't always make one lose all sense of discipline. I'll say good-bye to her like a man, and then obey my orders." . . . Ionê, are you going to make me regret my decision?'

Ionê stood up and faced him. Those cheeks, once so ruddy, were pale as a ghost. But she answered him firmly none the less:

'No, Owen, no. Go, if you feel you must. But, my darling, my darling, if you never come back, I shall die for your sake. I shall kill myself and follow you!'

'One thing more,' Owen added. 'I don't know what all this means. I go under sealed orders; but if I die—mind—not a word of suspicion against Mr. Hayward! I couldn't bear *that!* Promise me, darling, promise me!'

Ionê's voice was choked with tears, but, as well as she could, she sobbed out:

'I promise you!'

Then she flung herself upon his neck, like a child on its mother's, and cried long and silently.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A STRANGE SUGGESTION.

It was almost dusk when Owen reached Benlade, the countrified little Oxfordshire station on the Great Western line, where he was to meet Mr. Hayward. He had telegraphed on by what train he was coming; and as he descended from the carriage, somewhat chilled from his ride, a familiar hand pressed his shoulder kindly.

'Hullo, there you are!' Mr. Hayward said, trying to grasp his right hand. 'Well, I'm glad, at any rate, you came on at once. It's something to see still, my boy, you can at least obey orders!'

He spoke gravely, but affectionately, with a tender ring in his silvery voice. Owen blushed for pure shame as he thought at that moment of his gross disobedience in saying good-bye to Ionê. He held out his left hand somewhat awkwardly in return, for the right was bandaged.

'Why, what's this?' Mr. Hayward asked, looking down at it in surprise.

And Owen answered, not without a pang of regret at having to acknowledge so much levity at so grave a moment.

'Well, I had a slight accident with it at Moor Hill a couple of days ago. The fact is, I saw a gate by the roadside that wanted vaulting badly. It looked as good as new, though a trifle moss-grown. I touched it—just so—and the minute it felt my weight—hi, presto!—every bar of it came apart like magic; and down it tumbled, a bundle of sticks, with me in the midst of them. It reminded me of the deacon's "one-hoss shay." I crushed my hand and arm a bit just trying to save myself. But that's all. It's nothing. It'll be right in a day or two.'

Mr. Hayward glanced back at him with a strange wistful look of mingled distress and admiration. He surveyed those splendid limbs, that vigorous young body, that eager, ardent face, oh, so sadly, so regretfully.

'Why, my boy,' he said, with a bitter smile, 'how irrepressible you are! How uncrushable! The health and strength and youth in you *will* come out in spite of everything. What could ever have made me mistake such a lad as *you* for an instrument we could mould and model to our pattern? To think that even at such a depressing moment as this you had vitality enough left in you to vault the first five-barred gate you came to!'

'I was ashamed of it myself,' Owen answered penitently.

Mr. Hayward eyed him again, as they walked on

towards the lodgings, a small boy toiling behind them, panting with the portmanteau.

'So much life and energy,' he said, ruefully surveying his ward with admiring pity from head to foot. 'So much force and beauty; so much vigour and impetus. What a pity it must be so. . . . But there's no other way out of it.'

He walked along in silence a few yards further. Then he began quietly, once more, in no unfriendly tone:

'I'm glad you crushed your hand, though, my boy; it may make things easier for us.'

Owen hadn't the faintest idea what Mr. Hayward was driving at, but he walked on by his friend's side without another word till they reached the lodgings. Then the elder man led the way in through the leafless garden, pausing for a moment by the gate to remark upon the cold beauty of the wintry view—the long line of pollard willows by the river bank; the bare elms just beyond, in the hedgerow by the brook; the slender twigs of the birches, silhouetted by myriads against the twilight sky.

'I've had a shot or two at them with the camera,' he said, 'in spite of frost and snow. In fact, I haven't let either weather or my accident interfere with my ordinary pursuits in any way. I've been out on the river every day since I came. Mr. Wilcox, my landlord here, keeps a canoe and a dingey, which he lets out for hire. I've tried them both, and I find it really a most enjoyable exercise these frosty mornings.'

'Seems to take his mind off, poor gentleman!' Mrs. Wilcox, the landlady, said to Owen confidentially, some minutes later, as she ushered him upstairs to his bedroom in the little country inn, half tavern, half farmhouse, overlooking the river. 'I'm glad you've come, sir, for he's badly in want o' summat to interest him and amuse him. He's a real nice gentleman, that's just what he is, and kindness itself to the children; and so thoughtful and that, too. "Mrs. Wilcox," says he, when he come fust, "anythink'll do for me; don't let me disturb your own arrangements in any way." But he've talked a sight about you, sir, and been looking forward to your coming from the very fust moment he ever

arrived. "Ah, this'll do nicely for my young friend," says he, when he looks in at this very bedroom. He's main fond o' you, sir; one can see that with half a eye. Got neither chick nor child of his own, nor yet a wife no more, he tells me; so it ain't no wonder he should think such a lot of you.'

For Mr. Hayward's sake, in spite of his depression, Owen tried that evening to be as cheerful as possible. He went down to dinner in the stiff little parlour—the usual bare room of the English country inn, with coloured lithographs of red-coated hunters in full cry after a prodigiously brush-tailed fox for its sole decorations—and he even ate what he could, though the mouthfuls choked him. Good, simple Mrs. Wilcox had done her best in honour of 'Mr. Hayward's young gentleman,' and was distressed to see her spring chicken despised, as she thought, and her mince-pies unappreciated. But Owen couldn't help it. Conversation languished till the coffee came in. Then Mr. Hayward turned round, drew his chair to the fire, and began talking to him—in Russian.

Owen knew what that meant at once. It was the seal of secrecy. He bent forward to listen. Mr. Hayward, paler still, spoke earnestly, passionately.

'My boy, my boy!' he cried, in a sudden outburst of horror; 'you've read your Bible well. Do you remember how Abraham offered up Isaac?'

Owen's heart stood still within him. He knew it must come; but now that it had come at last it was very, very terrible. Strong and brave though he was, he was young and vigorous; and in youth to die, above all to be condemned to death, is simply heart-rending. And then there was Ionê. But he would never flinch from it. True Russian that he was in fibre, he would meet it, he determined, with Russian resignation and Russian fatalism. He bent his head in reply, and, speaking low in the tongue of his ancestors, made answer in the words of Isaac, 'Behold, my father, the fire and the wood.' For he was ready for the sacrifice.

Mr. Hayward rose up and stood pallid before him. Tears gathered in his eyes. His voice was thick and broken.

'Owen, Owen, my son,' he cried, very low but sadly; 'I'd give my own life if only I could let this cup pass from you. I've turned it over in my own heart a hundred times over; I've wrestled with it and struggled against it; but I see no way out of it. If *I* didn't strike, others would; for you are not your own; you are bought with a price, and *I* am not the only depositary of the secret. Others have shared with me for twenty years this burden and this hope. Others have heard from time to time all the chances and changes of the game as it went. They learned only the other day this appointment had been offered you. I wrote to them myself, in accordance with our arrangement. If *I* were to draw back now, *they* would follow up my work for me. . . . For your sake, for Ionê's, I've devised and perfected a more merciful way. There's no other plan possible now, I've decided upon this one!'

'What one is that?' Owen asked, trembling, but still submissive, still respectful.

Mr. Hayward paused.

'I can't tell you yet,' he said, wiping the tears from his cheek as they rolled slowly down without any pretence at concealment. 'If I told you, I'd give way, and there'd be a scene and a disclosure; and for the sake of the Cause—for Sacha's sake, for Ionê's, I couldn't bear *that*. It would be too, too terrible. . . . I mean, they'd know afterwards it was no accident, no casualty, but a pre-arranged plan. I don't want them to know that. Whatever Ionê may guess, whatever Sacha may guess, whatever Olga Mireff may guess, I want the world at large to think it was a mere unforeseen chance. . . . On that account I was glad your poor hand had been crushed. With a man of your physique it makes an accident like this . . . a little less improbable.'

'Why, what am I to do?' Owen asked, gasping hard. For Ionê's sake he could have wished it had been otherwise.

'Nothing,' Mr. Hayward answered, controlling his voice with difficulty. 'Nothing, nothing, nothing. Only come out with me to-morrow morning. I can't describe it. Ces choses-la se font, mais ne se disent pas. And

the less you know beforehand, in any way, the better. *I* will arrange the rest. It's more merciful so. . . . My boy, my boy, I do it all to spare you!'

He dropped into a chair, his hands clasped between his knees, the very picture of misery. For half an hour more they sat moodily silent. When Mrs. Wilcox came in from time to time, indeed, Mr. Hayward roused himself for the moment, with an evident effort. He talked as well as he was able in a forced tone of cheerfulness about the nothings of the day—people they knew in common, his latest photographs, the morning's news, the local surroundings of Benlade. He'd taken some good negatives of these frost-bespangled trees. But as soon as the landlady went out again they relapsed with one accord into the same listless attitudes as before. Owen sat gloomily and looked at the fire. Mr. Hayward sat gloomily and looked at Owen.

At last bedtime came. Mr. Hayward rose uneasily and took a bedroom candle. Then he turned and gazed at his ward—his victim—ruthfully.

'Owen,' he said, in a solemn voice, 'you're as dear to me and as precious as if you were my own very son. I've watched and thought, watched and thought, watched and thought, night by night, how I could manage to save you from this hateful necessity. I've struggled and wrestled with myself between the long slow hours in the early morning. I've prayed for light. But no light has come to me. It's terrible, terrible! My boy, I'd give my life for you—oh, so gladly, so willingly! But my life is nothing. To think how I've seen you grow, and watched your progress with pride, and filled my heart with the joy of you! And was it all for this? Oh, Owen, I wish to God I'd let you die in the snow that dreadful day at Wilna!'

Owen stood opposite him, candle in hand, all softened by his mute look of unspeakable anguish.

'Mr. Hayward,' he answered slowly, 'I'll die willingly, if that's all. I don't mind dying. . . . It's what I was brought up for.'

Mr. Hayward's soul went up from him in one deadly groan.

'Die? Die?' he said bitterly. 'Why, that's nothing, nothing. I could have borne to see you die, if it had been for martyred Russia! A mother even can bear to see her son die—a soldier's death—on the field of battle. But to die like this, inglorious, by a traitor's doom, with no task performed, no duty fulfilled, to escape a people's curse and a people's vengeance—it's *that* that stings me to the core—it's *that* that freezes my life-blood.'

And seizing his ward's hand very remorsefully in his own, he shook it hard twice, and went up to a sleepless night in his own cottage bedroom.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SENTENCE OF DEATH.

All that night long, till morning dawned, Owen never slept. How could he, indeed? He was a condemned criminal. He perfectly understood now he was to die the next day. Mr. Hayward had decreed it—remorsefully, self-reproachfully—but, still, decreed it. No sentence of any regularly constituted court could have had greater validity in Owen Cazalet's eyes than that man's mere word. His orders were, 'Come out with me to-morrow.'

'Come out with me to-morrow?' What could that phrase mean? Owen wondered. Was it dagger, or dynamite, or revolver, or poison? And why had Mr. Hayward brought him down by himself to this remote place to kill him? Here detection was certain; to pass in the crowd, impossible. Why not, then, in London, where escape is so easy? Why here, where every stranger became at once by his mere presence a conspicuous person? Owen turned it over in his own mind, but found no answer anywhere. He didn't even know to what manner of death he was condemned. That made it the more terrible. He knew only this much—he must die to-morrow.

And Ionê? Of Ionê he couldn't bear to think. Yet

here, under the bodily spell of Mr. Hayward's commanding voice and Mr. Hayward's compelling eye, he could no more dream of disobedience to his Chief than the soldier in the ranks can dream of mutiny before the very face of the general. Even Ionê herself was half forgotten for the moment. He thought most now of the pain and distress he was causing Mr. Hayward.

Hour after hour passed by—the clock clanged them in turn—and still he lay awake, and tossed and turned, and wondered. Towards morning, however, strange to say, youth and strength prevailed, and he dozed off into a deep sleep, as peaceful and undisturbed as the sleep of childhood.

At eight he woke with a start, rose in haste, much ashamed of himself, and went down to breakfast. It was the last he would ever eat—for he must die this morning. Mr. Hayward was there before him, pale, haggard, unhappy. The miserable look on the man's face struck Owen dumb with pity. More even than for himself he felt for Mr. Hayward. He gazed hard at him for a minute or two before he could make up his mind to speak. Then he said in a very soft and gentle voice:

'I'm afraid you've had no sleep. You look dreadfully tired.'

Mr. Hayward turned round upon him with all the fierceness of despair.

'Sleep!' he echoed. 'Sleep! How could I sleep at such a moment? Owen, I've passed twelve hours of speechless agony. I've fought more devils through the night than ever hell turned out. Russia and the Cause have trembled and tottered like a quicksand beneath my feet. My faith has vanished. . . . Owen, my boy, my boy, I'd give the world to keep you!'

Owen stared at him, cold to the bone.

'I wish it could have been otherwise,' he said slowly, with bloodless lips. 'But if it's needful I must die, I die willingly, ungrudgingly.'

The elder man rose, crushed a piece of paper in his hand, and flung it into the fire with a bitter gesture.

'Owen,' he cried, once more, 'I'm ashamed of myself for saying it. I'm going back upon the faith and hope of

a lifetime in saying it. I'm a devil for saying it. But, Owen, if all Russia in one person knelt there before me this moment with one neck to strike, I swear to God—oh, it's horrible—I'd lift my sword and strike her, willingly strike her, to save you.'

Owen bent his head meekly as if to receive the blow.

'If it must be, it must be,' he answered in all reverence, all humble resignation.

Mr. Hayward sat down and pretended to eat. He broke an egg, scooped it out, and flung the contents in the fire. He drank off half a cup of coffee, that choked him as he swallowed it, and then thrust his bread in his pocket, unable to eat it. The very drink almost burned him like molten metal. His face was livid and blue with his unspeakable misery.

As for Owen, he ate and drank as a condemned man will sometimes do on the morning of his execution, just to keep his courage up. That ghastly uncertainty about the mode of death chosen for him made him quiver with excitement. It was so terrible, too, that he couldn't even write a line to Ionê to tell her what must happen. He ate and drank in solemn silence, his guardian all the time looking on at him and groaning.

After breakfast, Mr. Hayward left the room for a minute, and Mrs. Wilcox came in to clear the table.

'Poor dear gentleman,' she said compassionately. 'He don't seem no better at all, but rather a bit worse if anythink this morning. I was in hopes when you come down, sir, it might 'a done him a power o' good to have fresh young blood about the house, as one may say, he's that dull and miserable. But, Lord, it ain't done him no good at all, as I can see, he's worse this morning nor ever I've known him—no colour nor nothink. And he tossed and turned, and got up so in the night, and walked about his room, that Wilcox he couldn't sleep for lying awake and listening to him. He says he do think Mr. Hayward must have a presentiment . . . and well he may, poor dear gentleman, for he ain't long for this world, that's certain. I wish he'd take some o' that there curative extract as saved my sister's life after ten years in a decline, an' her every bit as bad in her time as what he is.'

'I'm afraid,' Owen said gravely, 'it wouldn't do him much good. His case is too far gone for curative extracts now. Nothing's likely to save him. He's past hope, Mrs. Wilcox.'

A minute or two later Mr. Hayward came down again. He had on a rough pea jacket and a flannel boating cap.

'This is how I go attired to take my walks abroad in the dingey,' he said, with a ghastly attempt at some pretence of levity. 'Are you game for a row, Owen? It's chilly, but nice and clear on the water this morning, and I find nothing warms me up like a turn on the river.'

'All right,' Owen answered, endeavouring to imitate his friend's forced cheerfulness. 'I am not very fit myself, with my hand and arm like this, but it's best to use them, after all—it prevents stiffness.'

He followed Mr. Hayward, all wondering, to the bank, where Wilcox, the landlord, stood waiting with the dingey and the canoe, armed with a long-handled boat-hook. Mr. Hayward took his seat in the bigger of the two boats, and put the sculls in the rowlocks.

'You'll try the canoe, Owen,' he said. 'Mind how you get into her. She's an unsteady little craft, lop sided in a high wind. Topples over in a minute if you cough or sneeze or wink in her.'

Owen jumped lightly in.

'Oh, I'm accustomed to canoes,' he answered, now beginning to catch vague glimpses of what was coming next. 'I can do just what I like in them—stand up in them, lie down in them, dance a hornpipe, if necessary. I never upset. They're as easy as A B C when once you know the ways of them.'

He took the paddle in his maimed right hand, and tried a stroke or two, double-handed. It hurt his wrist a good deal, but he pretended to disregard it. Wilcox gave them a push with the long-handled boat-hook out into mid-stream, where the current caught them, and they glided away merrily down river towards Oxford.

The Thames was, of course, deserted at that time of year. Recent frosts on the canals had checked even the barge traffic. Not a soul stood about, not a boat was on the river. They made their way alone round a bend of

the stream, between silent banks, where the sedges drooped over the brink, heavily weighted with icicles. Bare pollard willows shut them in to the right, with beds of osiers whistling beyond in the wintry breeze. To the left were flooded water meadows. It was a dreary prospect. All was cold, and dim, and dreary, and desolate. At last Owen spoke.

'Shall I . . . ever come back again?' he asked in a tremulous undertone.

Mr. Hayward's voice was hardly audible through choked sobs.

'No, my boy,' he answered with an effort; 'or only to the churchyard.'

They rowed or paddled on then for a mile or two in silence. It was a lonely reach of the stream. No houses stood in sight, and even the towpath by the side lay still and deserted. Presently the dingey, which led the way by some twenty yards, turned sharply to the right down a still lonelier backwater. It was a fairly broad channel, used to turn a paper-mill; its bank was beset by tall flags and the dead stems of withered willow-herb. Owen followed in the canoe, with a vague presentiment of coming ill. At the end rose a sound of rushing waters.

Mr. Hayward spoke just once. His voice was now terribly calm and stern; but it was the calmness of despair, the sternness of the inevitable.

'There's a mill by the main stream just below,' he said in an inflexible tone. 'This backwater's the leet—over yonder's the overflow. It leads to a dam on the left; and beyond it I've found a very dangerous lasher.'

'I see,' Owen answered blindly, paddling forward once more in tremulous silence. He could feel his heart beat. He knew now what was coming.

As they reached the calm expanse at the top of the dam, Owen took it all in, step by step, unbidden. The water rushed deep enough over the lasher to float a small boat. The current ran fierce, and could engulf a man down in a canoe without difficulty. Below lay a deep pool, swirling and simmering with undercurrents. In its midst, the eddy from the lasher and the eddy from the flood-gates—mingling and battling as they met—made a

perpetual turmoil, and churned up the white surface into petty whirlpools, that could suck a swimmer down, even naked and in summer; but that would easily drown him, clogged with clothes and boots on, in icy winter weather.

Mr. Hayward had chosen his place of execution well. It was a very natural spot for an accident to happen. Owen saw it at a glance. Boat drawn down by the swirl, man upset and drowned there.

He glanced at the seething eddies, and at the board by the side, 'To Bathers: Dangerous.' Then he scanned his own strong limbs, and turned with a meaning look to Mr. Hayward.

'It's lucky the water's ice-cold,' he said, in a calm, deep voice, growing still with despair, 'and that my hand's so mangled. Otherwise, I don't think I could possibly drown in such a narrow space, even trying to do it. Those whirlpools aren't fierce enough. I swim too well. You see, it's almost impossible, however much you may wish it, not to struggle and strike out when you feel yourself drowning. The water gets in your throat, and you kick away, in spite of yourself. Besides, I'm so strong. I should flounder out, willy-nilly. But I'll see what I can manage. I'll do my best to restrain myself.'

'So do,' Mr. Hayward made answer, in the same inexorable tone, as of offended Russia. He rowed nearer and nearer, and motioned Owen to pass him. 'Now—here!' he cried, pointing with one finger to a rush of green water, in the very centre of the lasher, sliding smooth down its rapid slope into the wild thick of the whirlpool. 'When I cry "Off!" let go your paddle, and down the lasher full pelt. Upset boat at the bottom, and don't dare to swim a stroke. Hold your hands to your sides. Those are my orders—my orders. . . . Oh, heavens! I can't say the words. . . . Owen, Owen, Owen!'

And, indeed, as Owen, obeying his gesture, moved out into the full current, and paused with poised paddle, awaiting the fatal signal, 'Off!' a sudden access of horror and awe seemed to have seized his chief, who, even as he cried his name thrice, let the oars drop unexpectedly,

clapped his two hands to his ears, as women and children often do when terrified, and sobbed aloud in his agony once more :

'Oh, Owen, Owen, Owen!'

Then, before Owen could say what was happening, the whole spirit of the scene was suddenly changed, as if by magic. A terrible awe came over him. The rush of the water, catching the heavy dingey, no longer held back by the force of Mr. Hayward's arms, hurried it forward like lightning. Down, down it clashed madly over the inclined plane of the lasher. At the bottom, a rebellious undertow of white foam surged ceaselessly back, as if in anger, on the dark green flow. Arrived at that point, the dingey capsized like a helpless hulk. The sculls disappeared all at once in the seething gulf, the boat floating off by herself, bottom upwards. And Mr. Hayward's sacred head, the most venerable and venerated in the Nihilist hierarchy, showed dark for one moment as a black spot on the white foam . . . and then went under resistlessly.

At that appalling sight, Owen burst like a child into a wild shout of horror. Mr. Hayward upset! Mr. Hayward drowning! In a moment his own danger was forgotten forthwith in the profound realization of that irreparable loss to Russia and to humanity. Oh, how terrible he should be so hampered by that crushed and mangled hand! But, still, he must risk it. Could he bring him out alive? Over, over, and try for it!

CHAPTER XXXV.

DISCIPLINE.

With a wild cry of alarm, Owen steered his canoe into the midst of the stream, and dashed straight down the lasher, after Mr. Hayward. At its foot the canoe upset, and the paddle was wrenched from his hands—he had expected that much. Next moment he found himself, in coat and boots and trousers, battling hard for dear life in the icy-cold water.

Just at first the mad current sucked him under with its force, and cast him up again as it willed, and sucked him down once more, helpless, like a straw below Niagara. He danced about, flung hither and thither at its caprice, half unconscious. But after a minute or two, as he grew gradually more used to the icy chill, he felt his limbs alive, and struck out with desperate strokes, in spite of the wounded arm that shot pain along its whole length at every fierce contraction of those powerful muscles. Even then, for a second or two, the natural instinct of self-preservation alone inspired him. He plunged blindly towards the shore, in a wild fight with the numbing eddies, without so much as ever remembering, under the deadening effect of the sudden shock on his nerves, the existence of Mr. Hayward or his pressing danger. The water all round seemed to absorb and engross his entire attention. He was conscious only of deadly cold, and of the undertow that dragged him down, in his clinging clothes, and of sharp pains in his arms that all but disabled him for swimming.

After very few such strokes, however, he came to himself suddenly. With another wild cry, the truth broke in upon him again. Mr. Hayward! Mr. Hayward! Drowning, drowning, drowning! In an agony of horror, Owen Cazalet raised himself, as by a superhuman effort, head and shoulders above the cold flood, and peered around him, aghast, for his friend and guardian. Not a sign of the man anywhere! Not a mark, not a token! He must have gone under for ever. At that thought, Owen's blood ran colder within him than even the ice-cold water without. This was all his own doing! This was the outcome of his defection! He was his master's murderer! By his betrayal of the Cause, it was *he* who had brought Mr. Hayward into such deadly peril! Help, help! oh, help! What would he not do to retrieve himself? But how to do it? How save him? How repair this evil?

Frozen without and within, but fiery hot at heart with this new sense of wild danger—not for himself, not for himself, but for the chief of the Cause, the man he revered and respected above all men living—Owen began

to swim on once more, with fiery zeal, no longer shoreward now, but straight down the mid-pool in the direction where the eddies must have carried Mr. Hayward. As he swam, his maimed arm at each stroke grew more and more unbearably painful. But still he persevered, striking out with both legs and with his left hand, as best he might, while the right hung useless, battling the eddies in a fierce struggle, escaping with difficulty from those great watery arms that tried to clutch at him from below with intangible fingers, and whirl him resistlessly in their vortex, and pull him under like a straw, to fling him up again a mangled corpse on the milk-white foam some hundred yards further. It was a life-and-death grapple. Owen wrestled with the water as one might wrestle in fight with a human combatant.

At last, as he fought his way out into one upbubbling swash, that surged oozily to the top, a dark object in front of him rose for a second, uncertain, on the gurgling surface. Hair, hair! a man's head! It was him—Mr. Hayward! With a mad impulse of joy, Owen lunged out at it and seized it. He held it aloft in his grasp, propped it up again, caught and clutched it. The water tried to wrest it away, but Owen clung to it and kept it. The left hand under the chin! Under the arm! Under the shoulder! He was alive still—alive! Breathing, choking, and sputtering!

'Oh, Mr. Hayward, cling tight to me!' Owen cried, between fear and joy. 'Not on my arms. Don't impede me. Let me hold you under the chest—so. Now strike out. To land! to landward!'

But Mr. Hayward, half drowned, and numbed with the cold, made answer, in a voice rendered half inaudible by the water in his windpipe:

'No, no; let me drown, my boy. Don't try to save me; don't swim; don't strike out. Let us both go down together!'

At that moment, as he steadied himself, one of the sculls rose up, bobbing, by his side on the water. Owen seized it, and made Mr. Hayward grip his deadened white fingers round the thick part of the shaft. Then, holding it himself at the same time, and striking out

with his two strong thighs, he tried with all his might to push his rescued friend shoreward. But Mr. Hayward, seeing what he meant, unclasped his hooked fingers, and let the oar go suddenly. In a second he had gone under again, the water sucking him in as the eddy from an oar sucks down a floating speck of feathery swan's-down. Once more Owen plunged after him, and dived, with breath held hard, into the ice-cold whirlpool. It was an awful moment. He felt his wind fail him. The water was in his nostrils, his mouth, his lungs. Groping blindly in the dark, he caught his coat a second time. Then he clutched his man by the arm, and, with a terrible spurt, brought him back to the surface. There, a deadly struggle began between the two men—the rescuer and the rescued—in the piercing cold water. Mr. Hayward fought hard for leave to drown if he chose; he gripped Owen so tight he almost dragged him under. Owen, on his side, fought hard in return to save his friend's life—and all the hopes of Russia. His wounded arm got a fierce wrench, too, in the scuffle, that made him scream aloud with pain, and all but unmanned him for the fight. But still he persevered. It was with difficulty he kept himself up, and floundered on through the water, fighting his way every inch, with Mr. Hayward pressed close, like a baby, to his bosom. Thank Heaven for one thing—he was a wonderful swimmer. The very hopelessness of the case seemed to instil of itself fresh force into his limbs. The struggle was so hard, the odds against him so enormous. With clothes and boots, and in that numbing cold, maimed of one arm, he yet stemmed the deadly stream, and brought out the drowning man, against his own will, to the bankside.

By that time his force had almost failed him. But still, with a desperate spring, he lifted himself ashore, by leaning on his wounded right hand, and vaulting out of the water, while with his left he retained his grasp on Mr. Hayward's collar. After that, he dragged his companion unceremoniously to the bank, and laid him there panting and shivering, a torn and draggled thing, in a great wet mass of close and clinging clothing.

Mr. Hayward looked up at him, faintly, through a dim mist of watery eyes.

'What did you do that for, my boy?' he asked, in a sort of despairing expostulation.

'I couldn't let you drown, could I?' Owen answered doggedly, leaning over him all dripping.

'And I would have let *you!*' Mr. Hayward retorted, pulling himself together, and sitting up, the very picture of blank and dismal despair, in his wet, icy clothes, with the cold wind whistling through them.

'But that was different,' Owen answered. 'I had broken the bond, and deserved the penalty. I was waiting there, ready for the word of command. When that word came, I'd have gone over and drowned myself then and there without a moment's hesitation.'

'Owen, you are a man!' Mr. Hayward cried, raising himself.

Owen stood up in his turn, and grasped the cold hand hard.

'Now, run back to the village,' he cried, 'as quick and fast as you can go. Don't delay another minute. Our Russia has need of you.'

He turned to the brink himself, in his dripping things, and looked wistfully at the water. It was hard to die —hard to leave Ionê; but the Cause demanded it. As he stood and gazed, Mr. Hayward laid his hand on his pupil's shoulder with the old kindly weight.

'My boy, what are you going to do?' he cried, startled. 'You won't surely try again? You'll come back to the inn with me?'

But Owen only gazed harder at the great gurgling eddies from which he had just with such difficulty and danger emerged. The cold had now numbed him.

'No, no! That was to save your life,' he said with chattering teeth. 'I know my duty, I hope. Go, go— and be safe! When once you're well out of sight I shall do as I ought: I shall obey my orders.'

'Owen!' Mr. Hayward cried, holding him tight. 'Never! never! You can't! You've got no orders! I haven't given them yet! Do as you're told. Hold back. Discipline's discipline. This isn't what I bid you. It was to be at the word "Off," and I've never spoken it.'

'Well, you've spoken it now, then!' Owen answered, half mad with cold and despair. 'I hope I'm no coward. I won't take advantage of having saved your life against tremendous odds, to save my own against your express orders. Good-bye, Mr. Hayward. I've been a useless son, an unprofitable servant. I've served Russia ill. This is the only thing now. . . . Good-bye! good-bye! Give my love to Ionê!'

And without one moment's delay, tearing himself madly from the man's grasp, he plunged once more into the icy-cold pool that gurgled and bubbled in deadly tide before him.

True soldier to the last, he obeyed his sealed orders.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

'HOC ERAT IN VOTIS.'

MR. HAYWARD stood aghast. Mr. Hayward paused and hesitated. Not in doubt, not in suspense, but in pure bodily shrinking from a second fierce conflict with that deadly water. For some instants he gazed at the swirling current, irresolute. Then, lifting his hands to dive—for the bank shelved sheer, and the bottom was many feet deep in shore—he plunged boldly in after him, and struck out with all his might in the direction where Owen had disappeared beneath the surface.

It was no easy task, however, to find him; for this time the lad, as he had no life to save, bore his first instructions in mind, and allowed his wounded arm to lie idle by his side without struggling or floundering. Nay, more, as far as he was able, being now spent with swimming, he let himself go like a log and drift under with the current. It had whirled him away at once, down blind channels under water. But Mr. Hayward was by this time quite as much in earnest as Owen himself. The instinct of saving life, which comes upon all of us in any great crisis, had got the better of him involuntarily. He *couldn't* let that boy drown, be he traitor or no traitor—Owen, his own Owen, his heart's

fondest pride, his disciple and his friend, the child that was ten thousand times nearer and dearer than a son to him. With the mad energy of despair, he dived and plunged through the greedy eddies, letting the current suck him under and toss him up again as it would, but filled all the while with one devouring thought—the absolute necessity for bringing back Owen. He had sent him like a criminal to his death—his own dear, dear boy; and now the deed was done, he would have given his own life a dozen times over to bring him back again in safety.

At last, by a miracle of keen vision, such as occurs at supreme moments to high nervous organizations, he caught sight of a dark object far below in the water—down, down, deep down, carried along in full torrent. His heart throbbed at the sight. Diving once more with all his force, he plunged under and clutched at it. Owen, half conscious still, half insensible with the cold, tried to slip from his grasp—that was a point of honour. He struggled to be free, and to drown. With an effort he eluded the eager hand that clutched him, and went under a second time, borne headlong by the rapids. 'Oh God! he's drowning!' Yet again Mr. Hayward dived, again caught him by the collar, held him firm at arm's length, and brought him out—chilled, inert, and motionless—to the surface. This time Owen's eyes were fast shut; his cheeks were deadly white, his lips looked deep blue, his chest and lungs moved not. Mr. Hayward had hard work to hold him up with one hand—a seemingly lifeless corpse—above the water's edge, while with the other he struck out fiercely for the high bank beyond him.

It was a hopeless struggle. How could he think to reach land? Numbed, damped, and half drowned, with that listless dead weight poised, all prone, on the water's brim in front of him, Mr. Hayward plunged and fought, and battled slowly on with what life was left in him, and felt all the while the water sucking him down—irresistibly down—towards the race of the paper-mill. He was losing ground each minute, and gasping hard now for breath. The water filled his ears, his nostrils, his throat.

He could hardly hold up against it. Yet, in an agony of despair, he still bore Owen aloft, and kept the lad's mouth just a hair's breadth above the surface with superhuman energy.

He couldn't have endured one minute longer. He felt himself going; his eyes closed mistily. But just then, as he gasped and plunged, and knew all was up, a voice rang clear from ten yards in front:

'Keep him aloft their, maister. We're almost on 'im. That's right! Catch the pole! You 'ang on. I'll 'ook 'im.'

Mr. Hayward looked up, and saw dimly before him two men in a punt, one holding out a pole, while the other lunged towards them with a friendly boat-hook.

The drowning man seized the pole eagerly, and still clutching Owen's coat-collar, put the boat-hook through and through it, and let the men in the punt haul their burden in carefully. Then he scrambled into the boat himself, and, dripping from head to foot, sat down in the bottom, cold, wretched, and shivering.

'Is he dead?' he asked in a hollow voice, and with chattering teeth, feeling for the first time in his life like an actual murderer.

One of the men turned Owen over with that irreverent carelessness so characteristic of his class in dealing with a corpse—or what they believe to be one.

'Drowned, I take it,' he answered, feeling the motionless pulse and then the silent heart. 'Not a stir or a stroke in 'im. Anyhow, he ain't breathing just now, as I can feel. But there's no knowing with these 'ere cases o' wot they call suspended animation. Bringin' 'em back again to life, that's more like wot it is. We'll take him down to mill, and see wot we can do with 'im.'

Mr. Hayward bent over the pale face, all horror-struck in heart at this too terrible success of his scheme and his orders.

'Oh, don't say he's dead!' he cried aloud, wringing his hands. 'Don't tell me he's drowned! You'll break my poor heart worse than it's broken already if you tell me that. Oh, Owen, Owen, Owen, Owen!'

The second man looked on with that curious philosophical calm that belongs to the waterside.

'We seed the dingey a-coming down-stream bottom upward,' he volunteered slowly, punting away as he spoke; 'and I says to George, says I, "Why, George, that's Wilcox's dingey, surely!" And George he says to me, "That's so," says he, "Jim. Somebody's upset, for certain." And then come the canoe, turned topsy-turvy, as you may term it; and says I to George, "Blest,' says I, "if it ain't them folks up to Wilcox's! Don't know how to handle a boat, seems—not a bit they don't. Gone clean over lasher." So I went out with the punt, and I up with the pole, and comes down on the look-out for savin' a life, thinkin' at least to earn a honest suvverin.'

Mr. Hayward was in no mood just then to reflect to himself upon the man's frank sordidness of nature. He, who knew men and women so well, could feel no surprise at such utter callousness. But he was too full of his own grief to find room for anything else. He only cried aloud, in a perfect paroxysm of remorse and wounded affection:

'If you can bring that boy to life again, you shall have —not a sovereign, but fifty guineas!'

The man Jim raised his head, and opened his mouth and eyes. He could hardly believe his ears. He repeated slowly:

'Fifty guineas!'

But the other man cried hastily:

'Pole ahead to the mill, Jim. He've got some life in him still.' He felt the cold heart carefully. 'We might bring him to yet, with brandy and blankets and such. Pole ahead for dear life! 'Tain't every day o' the week one gets the chance o' earnin' fifty guineas!'

Obedient to the word, Jim poled ahead with a will, Mr. Hayward still crouching cold on the bare floor of the punt, and leaning over Owen, who lay calm and white as a corpse, with open, sightless eyes turned staringly upward. In a minute or two they reached the staithe, or little millside landing-place. The two men jumped out, and, with no more ceremony than they would have used to a bale of wastepaper, lifted Owen between them. Mr. Hayward followed them into the mill-keeper's house. There, all in a moment was confusion and bustle. The

inmates, well used to such scenes, got to work immediately.

'There's fifty guineas on it, mother,' Jim murmured to his wife, and the woman nodded.

They brought down blankets in hot haste, and, stripping off Owen's wet clothing, laid him down in them, well warmed, before the kitchen fire. Then they poured brandy down his throat, and began to move his arms up and down with a measured motion.

'Regular way to bring 'em to,' the man said calmly. 'Same as you breathe yourself, on'y slower. Fill the lungs each go. Directions of the Royal 'Umane Society.'

For twenty minutes they rubbed and chafed, and worked his arms continuously. Mr. Hayward, loosely wrapped himself in the mill-keeper's ulster, sat with chattering teeth looking on in blank despair. Owen was dead, dead, dead! and all was worse than lost to him!

He had meant to let the boy drown, and then go over himself, as if he had been accidentally lost in trying to save his companion. But that Owen should die, and that he should survive him like this—that was unutterable, unspeakable, too wholly ghastly and crushing!

'I've murdered him! I've murdered him!' he cried to himself in Russian, many, many times over, wringing his numb hands wretchedly beside the white, motionless body.

But the men worked on, meanwhile, taking no notice of his groans, with mechanical persistence and strange perseverance. Fifty guineas were at stake, and you never really can tell when a body's drowned! They moved the arms up and down in long, measured swing, to make artificial breathing, many minutes after Mr. Hayward had given up all for lost and relapsed into hopeless and speechless misery.

At last, all at once, after one vigorous movement, a sigh, a flutter in the breast, a strange gasp, a start, then—

'He's breathing! He's breathing!'

Mr. Hayward, thrilled through at the words, looked down at him in breathless and eager anxiety. The bare bosom was heaving and falling now once more.

'Brandy! brandy!' cried the man George, and Mr. Hayward passed it to him.

Another long interval, and Owen opened his eyes. Mr. Hayward fell on his knees in a wild transport of joy.

'Thank heaven!' he cried fervently in Russian once more. 'Then I haven't murdered him!'

And Owen, gazing dimly through a vague mist of faintness, seemed to see his friend's face held anxiously over him. He raised his white hand.

'Mr. Hayward—Mr. Hayward,' he said; 'Ionê—Ionê!'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN UNHAPPY APOSTATE.

After the tragedy of it, the comedy. There's nothing on earth more absurd than the drowned rat of the proverb. Wet, cold, and wretched, Mr. Hayward sat on shivering, and watched for an hour or two beside the rude trestle bed they made up in haste for the lad he had tried and intended to murder—or, at least, to aid and abet in a concerted suicide. The woman at the paper-mill urged him to return at once to the Wilcoxes' and get dry clothes and food; he'd catch his death o' cold, she said, in them nasty damp things; but Mr. Hayward wouldn't hear of moving from Owen's bed till he was certain of his recovery. The lad, after his breathing was once fairly restored, fell shortly into a deep sleep that lasted some hours. And all the time while he slept Mr. Hayward sat watchful and attentive by his side, and bent over him tenderly.

Slowly Owen recovered, thanks to a splendid constitution. The drowning itself wouldn't have hurt him, the doctor said, but for the cold and the shock; his dangerous symptoms were those of a nervous crisis. And he was ill from the strain. They moved him two days later from the paper-mill to the inn, where, under good Mrs. Wilcox's motherly care, he made gradual pro-

gress. To the people in the village, of course, it was only the common and familiar boat accident. 'Young fellow like 'im ought to a' knowed by this time how to manage a canoe; an' a did, too, come to that; o'ny the old un missed his tip and went over lasher, and the young un, tryin' to save un, got upsot hisself and went flounderin' about after un in the ice-cold water. Them currents do set strong by they floodgates above paper-mill. Easy enough to drownd one's self there, even at the best o' times, let alone in freezin' cold winter weather.'

The day after the 'accident' Mr. Hayward despatched a penitent telegram, nominally to Sacha, but really, of course, to Ionê. 'Owen upset in canoe in the river and nearly drowned I helped to rescue him. He is now recovering and doing very well. Come down, if you like, with Ionê to nurse him.'

That same night, needless to say, the two girls were by his side. Ionê met Mr. Hayward with a natural look of the profoundest suspicion. But Mr. Hayward, ever gentle and courteous as of old, half disarmed her wrath at once by taking her aside and into the next room, and holding her hand in his while he said to her frankly:

'Little daughter, I love him as if I were his own father. And for his sake I love you, too, Ionê. If only you knew all, you would know I was really trying to save him. But when it came to the point, I couldn't stand it myself, and, even against his own will, I was compelled to rescue him. Though now that I've rescued him, the original danger still stares me in the face. Ionê, it's not me. It's assembled Russia. I've saved him from one death, only to hand him over in the end to another and a worse one.'

Ionê looked at him aghast. It was more than she could understand.

'Mr. Hayward,' she said, not unkindly for who could be angry with the man?—he had such suffering on his face, such infinite remorse and pain in his weary eyeballs —'I don't know what to make of it all. I'm a simple English girl at heart, in spite of my Greek and Norwegian blood, brought up in London and in a country village, and I can't grasp all these strange things when I find

myself brought face to face with your Russian Nihilism. This mystery appals me. You must tell me what it all means. *What* is this strange danger that hangs over Owen?'

Mr. Hayward paused and gazed at her. He was holding her hand still—that soft, round little hand, with the dimples at the joints—and he smoothed it with his own, very gently and tenderly. They were contrasted, those two hands, like Russia and England. Ruric Brassoff's was thin, hard, iron-looking, virile; Ionê Dracopoli's was delicate and rounded, and the soft flesh stood out on it, dimpled, so that it yielded to the touch like a padded book-cover.

'My daughter,' the stern man said slowly in his silvery voice, 'you're the only person alive—man, woman, or child—who ever yet penetrated the secret of my existence. And now, I suppose, in time you'll be Owen's wife. What use in concealing from you what you must know hereafter? Sooner or later I must have an explanation with Owen—must tell him the difficulties that lie in my way, and the means I shall use or try to use in the effort—the hopeless effort—to meet and avert them. When that explanation comes—Ionê, it's promising a great deal; it's breaking all the vows and oaths by which our society is bound; it's exposing the secrets of the Cause to a woman and an outsider—but . . . I trust you so much, you shall be present and hear it.'

He said it with such an air of distinguished honour conferred that Ionê herself couldn't help feeling deeply complimented.

'Thank you,' she said in reply. 'But, Mr. Hayward, one thing. You must answer me that, or how can I hold your hand? Did you, or did you not, upset him into the water?'

Mr. Hayward withdrew his hand quickly, as if he had been stung. His face, already lined and pallid with suspense, showed every sign of acute pain at the bare suggestion.

'Ionê!' he cried, drawing back. 'Oh, how could you? How can you? How much you misunderstand me if you think such a question worth asking! How much

you misunderstand *him* if you think such a step would ever be necessary!'

'Then he tried to drown himself of his own accord!' Ionê exclaimed, bridling up and deeply stirred with horror.

'Wait and ask him,' Mr. Hayward answered. 'He'll be better soon. He'll be able to tell you. All I can say myself just at present is this: If I advised him to take such an unhappy course, it was only to save him—and you, too, through him—from greater pain and worse disgrace in the end, from which I don't know now how I'm ever to save you.'

Ionê looked at him fixedly. The man's drawn face was wrung by despair and evident anguish. She gave her hand once more.

'I believe you, Mr. Hayward,' she said simply. Somehow, it was impossible to be near that strange being and not to sympathize with him for the moment. He had tried to drown her Owen—of that Ionê felt sure; and yet—and yet he had done it, she vaguely recognised herself, in no unfriendly spirit. He might be a murderer, perhaps; but, at least, he was a murderer with the best possible intentions.

It was dreadful for simple English people like her and Owen to get mixed up with these incomprehensible and too complex Russian revolutionists. Yet what could they do? He was born to it; it was his destiny.

Mr. Hayward stroked his face with one inscrutable hand. There was blank despondency in the action. Ionê felt it, and was sorry for him. Then he paced up and down the room once or twice in silence. At last he spoke again. His words came in a rush like a summer torrent.

'My child,' he said, bursting forth, 'if you knew all, you would pity me. Ah, yes, you would pity me—oh, how you would pity me! A fortnight ago I saw myself within measurable distance of the realization of the hopes of a lifetime. I was glad. I was exultant. I was full of joy and triumph. At that very moment when I wrote to Owen to tell him of our great good luck—to bid him rejoice with me, to assure him of victory—there came in return such a knock-down blow that I thought no blow

on earth could ever be harder—no fate more terrible. Fortune, I said to myself, had done the very worst she could possibly have in store for me. My cup was dashed down as I held it to my lips. Owen, my own boy, whom I loved more dearly than I loved my life—for whom I'd sacrificed everything—whom I'd watched and guarded and taught since he was a baby in arms, just able to lisp his own name in Russian—Owen, Owen went back upon me. It was he and no other. He told me that for the love of a girl he'd wrecked our hopes and plans irretrievably. . . . And did I hate that girl for it? . . . No, Ionê, no; for Owen's sake, I loved her—and I love her.'

He laid his hand like a father on the loose chestnut curls. Ionê felt a thrill run responsive through and through her. The man's eye was as one inspired. His lip quivered convulsively. He went on yet more quickly.

'That was bad, little daughter,' he said, still fondling the chestnut curls—and Ionê hadn't the heart even to try to prevent him. 'That was bad. That was a fall, a relapse, a backsliding. Still, though my soul was broken, I had one thing left—and that was Owen. All my hopes for him were gone—crushed, annihilated, shattered. But Owen himself—and only Owen—was left. The boy, not the liberator; my son, not my instrument. . . . I had hoped for a Messiah who would free poor Russia. I was left with a dear child—a mere handsome young Englishman. But I loved him still. Oh, Ionê, how I loved him! As the hopes within me fell, crushed, so the affections quickened. I said to myself: "I've loved Russia like a fanatic all my weary long life, but Owen and Russia have grown so intertwined and mixed up in my ideas—so one in my inmost soul—so indistinguishably blended—that now, oh God! I don't know which is which." I love Owen in the end even better than Russia. There he stands—concrete, visible—a definite tangible Somebody for one's heart to take hold of. I love him with all my soul. When it came to the pinch, I couldn't bear to lose him.'

He paced up and down once more. Then he returned to her, all on fire. His eyes glowed terribly.

'Ionê,' he cried in his despair, 'I can't tell you all now. It would burn my very heart out. But this much I *will* tell you—let Owen tell the rest. I felt if he must die I could never outlive him. Not a day, not an hour, not a minute, not a second. He was part of my life—a limb of my body. Oh, Ionê, it's sin, it's blasphemy to say so; but I found, when I put it to the touch—oh, shame!—I found . . . he was far more to me than even Russia. I fancied to myself I had lived all my life for Russia alone; but I found that day my boy was far more to me in the end than even Russia.

'They would kill him. They would torture you. They would keep you in suspense for months and months, Ionê. Better an easy death for him at my hands than that. Or not even at my hands—at his own; but beside me, in my company. I meant *him* to go over first. I meant at once to follow him; but when I saw him drowning, and was drowning myself, my heart failed within me. I couldn't bear to permit it. Let them do what they would, I must save Owen's life for the moment—for you. I must prolong it as much as I could. I must bring my boy back—for a time—to the girl that loved him.'

'Thank you,' Ionê said low.

In some dim, distinctive way she was beginning now to understand him.

Mr. Hayward clasped his hands hard in unspeakable horror.

'But that's not all yet!' he cried. 'We're not out of the trouble. As I said to you in Victoria Street, so I say to you still—we're only beginning. I must put my wits to work now—for what do you think, Ionê? Why, to undo my life's work, to annul my life's plans, to prevent the success of my own elaborate precautions! I had arranged everything beforehand, so that a terrible punishment should fall upon myself or upon Owen, as the case might be, if either of us forgot our troth or proved untrue to our engagements. I had made it as sure as any sentence of any court on earth could be made sure. Now I must brace myself up to see whether and how I can shatter my own hopes and destroy my own handiwork.

. . . And I fear it's impossible. I laid my plans too deep; I dug my pit too widely. . . . But for that, and for that alone, I must live in future. . . . Oh, Ionê, dear child, see the extremity of degradation to which you two have reduced me: I meant, if need were, to sacrifice Owen to Russia; I mean now, in the end, to sacrifice Russia to Owen.'

He bent his head down between his arms in an agony of shame and remorse at that painful confession. To him it was apostacy. Ionê couldn't be angry with him now. His case was too miserable. He had tried to play an abstraction against his human affections; and the human affections had proved in the long-run a great deal too strong for him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BAD NEWS FROM KIEFF.

Two or three days later Owen was well enough to be removed to the flat off Victoria Street. Mr. Hayward went up to town with him in a saloon carriage, and the new invalid was put, when he arrived there, into Blackbird's bedroom. Round the wall, as a fitting decoration, Blackbird had painted with her own hands a poetical inscription—four favourite lines of hers from Swinburne's 'Hymn to Proserpina':

'Thou art more than the day or the morrow, the seasons that laugh or that weep;
For these give joy and sorrow—but thou, Proserpina, sleep.
Thou art more than the gods who number the days of our temporal breath;
For these give labour and slumber—but thou, Proserpina, death.'

Owen watched them all the morning from the bed where they laid him, but in the afternoon he was allowed to move on to the drawing-room sofa. Not that he was really ill—severe as the shock had been, his vigorous constitution had recovered from it quickly—but Mr. Hayward, always devoted to his ward, was as careful

over him now as a hen with one chicken. Even Ionê herself had no cause to complain of any want of consideration on Mr. Hayward's part for Owen's safety and Owen's absolute comfort. He fussed about as if his life depended on making Owen well, and keeping him so always. He had but one thought in life now—his boy's happiness, which included, of course, Ionê's.

And Russia—poor Russia? Well, Russia was crushed and pressed out within him. An awful blank reigned in her place in his heart. His face was one picture of despair and dejection.

But the urgent need now was to provide for Owen's safety. That care weighed hard on Mr. Hayward's soul. For he had planned beforehand against Owen's life by every means in his power.

The very day after they arrived at Victoria Street, he sent Blackbird and Sacha out into the park for a walk, that he might have time for a private talk with Ionê and Owen.

So strange a talk few drawing-rooms in Pimlico can ever have listened to.

He began, and told them the truth from the very beginning. One only fact he suppressed — his own identity with Ruric Brassoff. All the rest he told them in full—making a clean breast of it, as it were, both to Owen and Ionê. He told them all he knew about the St. Petersburg Selistoffs; how he had rescued the two children, twenty years since and more, at the risk of his own life, and smuggled them out of Wilna; how he had brought them to England, and placed them with Miss Cazalet as their mother's half-sister; how he had come back, three years later, and struck that strange bargain on those mysterious terms with poor unconscious Aunt Julia; and how he had supported Owen ever since in every comfort and luxury on Nihilist money.

There he paused and wiped his brow.

'And that money itself,' he said slowly, in very remorseful tones, 'do you think, my children, I got it for nothing? Do you think there was no security, no collateral guarantee for it? Ah, that's not the way we of the circle went to work on our undertakings. All was

arranged and audited, as if it were public funds, with the minutest accuracy. Part of it I earned myself, to be sure, and contributed willingly out of my own abundance, for Mortimer and Co. has always been a paying business. But part of it came from Russia—poor, bleeding Russia—from trusty friends of the Cause in Petersburg or Moscow; and for that guarantees were both given and exacted. Three persons, besides myself, know on whom the fund was spent. One of them is in Paris; the two others are in Russia.'

'And do they alone know of your plans?' Owen asked, in breathless suspense, from the sofa where he lay.

'Not they alone. No; many subscribers to our circle know the main outline of the facts; they know we were bringing up a young man in England—Sergius Selistoff's son—to follow in his father's footsteps as a martyr to Russia. More than that—they know also that Sergius Selistoff's son was to obtain some post in a foreign capital whence he might strike a great blow at the curse of Russia. But what they don't know'—and Mr. Hayward lowered his voice confidentially—'what they don't know is this—the assumed name and present address of Sergius Selistoff's son, for whom they have done so much, and from whom they expect such marvels. Three people alone, besides myself and you two, knew that secret till lately; four know it now! Madame Mireff is one of them; the others, of course, are wholly unknown, even by name and fame, to you.'

'Madame Mireff is a friend!' Ionê exclaimed, with womanly instinct.

'Perhaps so. Who knows?' Mr. Hayward answered, bowing his head in a sudden access of shame. 'If *I* have fallen away, who may not fall away, for personal motives, from poor helpless Russia? But each of the other three holds in his possession a sealed envelope. That sealed envelope contains his orders. It is to be opened, in each case, on either of two contingencies—my death, or if for three months the holders receive no communication on the subject of the fund from me. And if I myself fail to show them in three months from this time that Sergius Selistoff's son is in a fair way to follow out the

teachings I have bestowed upon him—then the holders of those three envelopes are bound by solemn oath never to rest in their beds till they've taken vengeance on the traitor—on you, Owen Cazalet.'

There was a silence in the room. Mr. Hayward still bent his head. Then, at last, with a burst of inspiration, Ionê spoke.

'Can't you get those envelopes back?' she asked. 'Can't . . . the Russian police . . . since Owen won't act . . . help you to get them back again?'

The two men, in their utter horror, started unanimously from their seats and gazed at one another, speechless. Owen was the first to find words.

'What! betray them,' he cried, 'for one's own base life, to the spies of the Czar—these men who have befriended me! Save one's neck by handing them over to the mines of Siberia! Oh, Ionê, you can't have realized what your words really mean. Better death, ten thousand times over—an honest man's death—than such perfidy as that! I can die if I must; but sell my comrades—never!'

Mr. Hayward laid his hand on the younger man's shoulder. His face was flushed with pride.

'Owen, my boy,' he said gravely, 'I see you haven't forgotten quite all that I taught you. I've a plan of my own, though, far better than Ionê's. No treachery; no apostasy. I shall try what I can do with the holders of those envelopes. I mean to preserve you, if it's possible to preserve you, without treason to the Cause. You know yourself, if our men were once well on your track, no power on earth could save your life. All the strength of the Empire didn't avail to save Alexander Nicolaievitch. But I shall go off myself at once, first to Paris, then to Kieff, then to Moscow and Petersburg. I'll see these three men; I'll endeavour to get from them those incriminating documents. No human soul but ourselves shall ever know who was Sergius Selistoff's son. If I die for it myself, I shall get the sealed orders back from them.'

Owen seized his friend's arm.

'To Kieff—to Moscow!' he cried, aghast, knowing

well what the words meant. 'You won't surely expose yourself? No, no! Not in Russia.'

'Yes, in Russia,' Mr. Hayward answered, with a calmly dogged face. 'For twenty years I've avoided my country for my country's sake. I had hoped so to save her. Now those hopes are all wrecked; for *your* sake I'll revisit her. I'll not rest, day or night, till I've got the papers back again. . . . No, don't try to stop me. To Russia I'll go, Owen, though all the spies in Petersburg should know I was going there, though all the devils in hell should conspire to prevent me.'

Again there was a pause.

Then Mr. Hayward spoke once more.

'I brought you into this scrape,' he said, 'and I must see you well out of it, if that's still possible. Owen, my boy, I admit I did wrong. You were a child when I made this bargain on your account. Now you're a man, and can see what it all means, and know how to choose for yourself, you've a right to back out of it. Even if I give up my life to release you from the bargain you never wittingly made, it may be of no avail. But I *will* give it up, if need be. I'll do my best to protect you.'

Owen took his hand warmly.

'Dear, dear Mr. Hayward,' he said, with profound emotion, 'don't trust yourself in Russia on my account, I beg of you. I'd rather let this fate hang over me, whatever it may be, than think for a moment you should so risk and expose yourself.'

But he had to reckon with a woman as well.

Ionê rose passionately, and flung herself upon Mr. Hayward's neck. Then she spoke out with tremulous haste.

'No, no, Mr. Hayward,' she cried, quivering, and clinging to him in her earnestness. 'You owe it to him. It's your duty. I, who love him, ask you to go. You owe it to me, too. He's mine more than yours. You admit you did wrong. You must be just, then, and protect him.'

Mr. Hayward, unwinding her arms, took her hand in his own, still grasping Owen's with the other one.

'Yes, I'll go, my children,' he answered. 'My life's

wrecked. I have but one hope, one wish on earth now —to make you two happy.'

'And while you're gone,' Owen said gravely, 'I, too, shall have a task to perform—to set about earning my own livelihood, at last, and repaying the Cause all I owe to Russia.'

Mr. Hayward was just about to answer something, when a ring at the bell roused Ionê automatically.

As housemaid of the flat, she rushed out to answer it.

'A telegram for you, Mr. Hayward,' she said, returning.

He tore it open on the spot and read it eagerly.

'Just arrived across the German frontier. Couldn't communicate before. Am returning now post-haste to England. Very serious news. Ossinsky arrested ten days ago at Kieff. All is known, except the English name of Sergius Selistoff's son. That they can't find out; but the danger is great. Smuggle him away at once, for heaven's sake.

'OLGA MIREFF.'

Mr. Hayward handed it across to them without one word of comment.

Ionê looked blankly at it, while Owen read aloud the secret cipher.

Mr. Hayward stood awestruck. As soon as they'd finished, he said but a few words, with blanched and trembling lips.

'I must go this evening. . . . Ossinsky was one of them!'

'To Moscow?' Owen asked.

'No; first of all to Paris. Once I get to Russia, I may never come back again; so I must settle Paris first. But there's no time to be lost. I'll telegraph to Olga to await me in Berlin, and I'll start for Paris this very evening.'

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

TRUE to his word, Mr. Hayward left that evening by the night mail for Paris. As soon as he was gone, a blank fell upon the party. After the cumulative excitement of the last few weeks, it seemed almost impossible for them to settle down once more to the humdrum routine of every-day life—the 'domestic round of roast and boiled,' as Blackbird loved to call it. Conversation languished; platitudes failed; common events seemed tame; even Ionê's bright heart felt the lack of some more pressing stimulus. They had grown accustomed to the feverish suspense of Nihilistic life; this long waiting for news from Paris, Kieff, or Moscow struck them as dull and monotonous after those pungent episodes of the lasher and the sealed envelopes. Only the doubt as to the future kept them on the *qui vive* now; would Mr. Hayward succeed or fail in his momentous enterprise?—that was the question.

Meanwhile, however, Owen began to realize still more definitely and clearly than ever that he ought to be doing something for his own livelihood. It was impossible he could any longer depend upon Mr. Hayward; still more impossible that he could draw further on Aunt Julia's scanty private income. So he settled down for the time in Sacha's rooms, intent on the favourite and indispensable operation of looking about him. But looking about one, though a very good occupation in its way as a change from overwork, is a mode of life that soon wearies and sates a vigorous young intelligence.

Owen found it unsatisfactory in the very first week, and longed for some more active and remunerative employment. Yet he might have gone on indefinitely looking about him all in vain for months together—so thronged with suitors is every gate in London—but for an accident that occurred a few days later to Trevor Gardener.

They were sitting one afternoon in the drawing-room

of the flat, Ionê and Owen, very absorbed and moody, thinking over the chances of Mr. Hayward's mission and the reason of his silence—Sacha working away at 'cooking' a sketch, Blackbird hanging over the piano and trying a chord or two at a time in the throes of composition—when a latch-key turned quickly in the front-door of the suite, and Trevor Gardener looked in, deadly white and terrified.

'Is Sacha here?' he asked, holding the door ajar. 'I beg your pardon for coming like this, but I want to speak with her.'

Sacha rose, and gave him her hand.

'Come into the studio,' she said, trembling suddenly. And Trevor Gardener followed her.

As they reached the room, he shut the door, and looked at her, fixed and white.

'Oh, Sacha,' he said abruptly, taking her hand in his own, 'how lucky it was, the other day, after all, you didn't accept me!'

'Why so?' Sacha asked, glancing up into his face trustfully, and letting her hand lie in his, for she had learned by this time to love him with all her heart. 'Oh, Trevor, what's the matter? Something dreadful has happened.'

'No, nothing very dreadful,' the young man answered, with blanched lips that belied his words. 'At least, not when you are accustomed to it.'

'But why lucky?'

'Well, Sacha, just for this excellent reason—and I'm so thankful you said *no* to me. Because if you'd said *yes*, you'd have accepted a beggar.'

Sacha laid one soothing hand on his shoulder and smiled. Yes, positively smiled. Such a thing it is to be born a Russian, or half one. Those people have no idea of the importance of money.

'Something gone wrong in the City?' she asked, almost pleased, as it seemed to him.

Trevor Gardener winced and nodded.

'Yes, something gone wrong,' he said; 'no, everything gone wrong, rather. And so terribly—so terribly. You could never understand it. My partner, Wilson—oh,

Sacha, such a blow! not for myself, I don't mean—not for myself, of course, but for our clients who trusted us!'

'What has he done?' Sacha asked, with a strange feeling in her throat which was certainly not altogether either sympathy or sorrow.

'Done?' he answered, gasping. 'What's he done? Why everything. What's he not done's more like it. Embezzled, mismanaged, over-speculated, gambled, falsified accounts, stolen clients' money, invented imaginary stocks for country clergymen and confiding old ladies, committed every crime a rascally partner could possibly be guilty of. It only came out this morning. And now he's gone away, leaving a note behind to tell me he means to cut his own throat, and shuffling upon *me* the responsibility of meeting the firm's engagements.'

'Has he any private means!' Sacha asked, anxious to know the worst at once.

'Not a penny, as far as I can learn. He's gambled away everything. All his own stocks are gone, and his wife's and his father-in-law's. As for his house at Wimbledon, that's a drop in the bucket. I haven't realized the full extent of his defalcations as yet. But at the very best—and fresh things are turning up every minute—my capital and investments must go to cover it, and even then the firm will be hopelessly bankrupt. Ten shillings in the pound will be the outside dividend.'

Sacha gazed at him undismayed.

'Then, you're a poor man now, Trevor,' she cried, flushing crimson. 'You haven't a penny to bless yourself with.'

'Not a penny to bless myself with,' Trevor responded grimly

In a tumult of passionate joy, Sacha flung her arms round his neck.

'Dear Trevor!' she murmured very low 'Then, at last I may love you!'

'May love me?' Trevor echoed, amazed.

'Yes, and marry you now, Trevor.'

She said it tenderly, joyfully, with deep earnestness in her quivering voice.

Trevor gazed at her and sighed. She was a wonderful woman.

'But why now, if not before, Sacha?' he asked, all bewildered.

To him, good, solid, sober-minded, commercial Englishman, this blow had seemed like a death-knell of all his hopes in life. He had been thankful for one thing only — that Sacha hadn't accepted him.

But Sacha, for her part, still clinging to him in her joy, said firmly and resolutely:

'Before, you were rich, dear; and I wouldn't marry a rich man, on whom I must be dependent. Now you're poor—oh, so poor; why, much poorer than myself—and I can marry you to-morrow with no loss of my pride; for I am making a bigger income every month of late, Trevor; and if you can put up with small things, why, we'll marry at once, and you may begin life over again.'

The young man started back in dismay.

'Oh no, darling!' he cried, astonished. 'How could I ever do that? I'm a man; you're a woman. You said to me that day on the downs at Moor Hill you wouldn't marry anyone who was richer than yourself, because you didn't want to be like the women who sell themselves for the pittance of a livelihood. Your creed was the perfect equality of the sexes, and you wouldn't go back upon it. Well, then, if you, who are a woman, couldn't be dependent upon a man, how can I, who am a man, be dependent upon a woman?'

He said it manfully, honestly, with big open eyes. Sacha paused a moment and reflected; his argument caught her napping. She drummed her fingers on the table to assist her thought. At first hearing, this certainly sounded like a genuine dilemma. Yet she knew it wasn't insuperable. Then slowly, by degrees, she felt her way out of it.

'No, it's not quite the same,' she said in her deliberate, logical fashion. 'The cases aren't parallel; and I'll tell you the difference. Women till now have all been naturally dependent upon men; it's been taken for granted they must be paupers and hangers-on. And each of them has been dependent upon a particular man—his slave and his chattel. That's a system I hate, and I don't want to perpetuate it. Therefore I stood out

against marrying a man much richer than myself—even though I loved him—beside whose wealth my little earnings would be as nothing in the family. That was my womanly pride. It's quite different with men. They've no inequality to redress, no principle to vindicate. If a woman can help them at a pinch to re-establish their fortunes, why not avail themselves of the chance, and make her happy?'

She looked up into his face, a tender look, with those great trustful eyes of hers, as she said the last words. In spite of bankruptcy and ruin, Trevor Gardener thrilled through and through at her touch as she raised his hand to her lips, and laid her head, all unbidden, in the hollow of his shoulder.

'Trevor,' she murmured once more, very low and soft, 'you were ready to marry me when you were rich and successful and could have given me everything that heart can desire. See—I ask you myself to-day—won't you marry me now you're poor and distressed and disheartened, and let me fight the battle of life with you for your help and comfort?'

It wasn't in human nature that Trevor Gardener at such words shouldn't bend down, enraptured, to kiss those liquid eyes, swimming with rare tears, and those thoughtful thin lips, held appealingly up towards him.

'Sacha darling,' he said with a burst, smoothing her hair with his hand, 'if for a moment I say *no* to you, trust me, it isn't that I love you less—it's that I respect you more. I can't bear to be a drag upon you, to make you share my poverty. I wanted to marry you that I might find you such luxuries and let you live in such comfort. But now I should only hinder you. And I can't bear to say *yes* to you—though you ask me so sweetly.'

'You *shall* say *yes*,' Sacha answered with fervour, all the latent passion and earnestness of her half-Russian nature coming out in full force at this faltering opposition. 'I love you, Trevor, I love you, and you *shall* say *yes* to me. I want to fight this battle with you; I want to retrieve this loss; I want to be of use to you—a pillar, a staff, a prop, to help you. Money! Why, darling,

when you were rich I couldn't bear to take you, among other things, because I don't know whether it's right for some of us to have so much, when others have so little. I was shocked and afraid when you told me how many thousands you made a year. But if you're poor now, I want you, I long for you, I ask you, I must have you!' She flung her arms wildly round his neck once more, and burst into a sudden flood of fiercely passionate tears. He could hardly believe this was Sacha. The pent-up emotion of months found full vent all at once. 'Oh, promise me you'll take me, darling!' she cried, clinging to him with all her soul. 'Promise me—promise me you'll take me—you'll marry me!'

Trevor Gardener was a man; and men usually find it difficult to say *no* to anything when a woman asks them outright for it. And, besides, he loved her. He loved and admired her with all his heart and soul. Yet even so, he tried hard for a moment to stand out, for manly dignity's sake.

'When this bankruptcy's arranged,' he said feebly, pressing her to his breast—a bad moment for negotiations. 'When . . . I've retrieved my position a bit, Sacha. When I can earn an income.'

'No, now,' Sacha cried fervently—that placid Sacha—flinging herself upon him at last with the utter self-abandonment of a good woman in a crisis that demands it. 'Now at once, just as things stand. You must! You shall, Trevor! To show my confidence in you, your trust in me! Not a day must we wait! To-morrow! To-morrow!'

It was some minutes before they went back to the others in the drawing-room. When they did so, Sacha's dignified face was flushed and red with not unbecoming blushes, and she wore in her breast a single drooping gardenia, the very last gardenia Trevor Gardener was ever to buy for his own adornment. As she entered the room, both Ionê and Blackbird noticed the unwonted token, and glanced at it significantly with inquiring eyes.

'What does it mean?' Sacha said, interpreting their unspoken thoughts aright, and answering them frankly.

'It means that dear Trevor's been ruined by his partner's dishonesty—and that, therefore, there's no reason why he and I shouldn't be married as soon as ever we can get the banns published.'

CHAPTER XL.

'GOOD-BYE—FOR EVER!'

A BANKRUPTCY'S a long and weary business, and before Trevor Gardener was well out of the wood a good many things had had time to happen.

Among others, a day or two later, a short note came for Owen, in cipher, from Mr. Hayward at Paris. It said simply this:

'With great difficulty, my dear boy, I've succeeded in recovering the first of the sealed envelopes from my trusted friend over here, but only, I'm sorry to say, by a transparent ruse, which he resents intensely. This may greatly embarrass us. He knows or guesses from my action that Sergius Selistoff's son must have refused his trust or gone back upon his bargain, and that I'm trying now to cover his retreat by counteracting my own most elaborate precautions. My fear is, therefore, that he may write to my other friend at Moscow, to warn him of my defection; in which case the envelope may, perhaps, be opened before I reach there. If so, my boy—I can't conceal the facts from you—you are simply doomed. But I will hope for the best. Give my love to Ionê. I start, if possible, for Russia to-morrow. These may be the very last lines you will ever receive from your affectionate and penitent friend and guardian,

'LAMBERT HAYWARD.'

Owen received this letter with very mingled feelings. It was satisfactory as far as it went, no doubt, that one more chance of Nihilist revenge should be curtailed or destroyed; but, on the other hand, the deep sense of being a traitor to the Cause itself, and of having induced

even Mr. Hayward to turn traitor too, sat heavily upon him. His one consolation lay in the thought that Ionê was pleased, and that she felt perfect confidence in Mr. Hayward's powers to prevent further mischief when once he got to Russia.

Even before Trevor Gardener's bankruptcy, however, had been finally disposed of, it was fully settled that the penniless stockbroker was to marry Sacha at once, and after their marriage he and Owen were to start a new business together—at first in Owen's name alone, on a scheme that Sacha had long been turning over in her head—a co-operative picture-dealer's, for selling works of art on joint terms with the artists. Sacha was prepared out of her little savings to find at once the preliminary capital; and as rooms were obtained in connection with Mr. Hayward's premises in Bond Street, they had good hopes at the start of a successful venture. Sacha had a large acquaintance among painters, both men and women, and chose with care the co-operators who were to share their attempt. Trevor Gardener, on the other hand, had a large acquaintance among the picture-buying class, whom he could influence by his judgment, while Owen's striking appearance and fame as an athlete might attract from the outset, they hoped, out of pure curiosity, a certain amount of custom. Nor, as a matter of fact, were they disappointed. This is an age of well-bred commercial ventures. The business from the very first was a decided success; and before many months were over, when Trevor's affairs were settled, they found themselves already making a tolerable profit.

Nor did Trevor's affairs turn out quite so black in the end as he at first had feared. True, the assets didn't cover more than sixteen shillings in the pound; but that was better than the ten of his earliest calculations; and when all was over, the ruined man made up his mind bravely to begin life over again, and work hard for rehabilitation till he could return his creditors in full the deficit caused by his partner's dishonesty. Meanwhile, he and Sacha were married, after all, and took up their abode together in a flat off Victoria Street.

Not so long after, it occurred casually to Henley

Stokes one morning at Pump Court to stroll round once more for a further appeal to Blackbird's feelings. This shilly-shallying irked him. If marriages were to be the order of the day in the phalanstery of the flat—hang it all!—why shouldn't he, too, bear his part in the modest pageant? So, dressing himself very spick and span in his best frock-coat, with the usual orchid neatly pinned in his buttonhole, he sallied forth to Victoria Street, determined this time that Blackbird should explain herself and the mysterious reason why, though she loved him, she wouldn't marry him. He would be put off with no subterfuges; he must get at the very core of his lady-love's objection.

His touch at the electric bell was answered, as usual, by Ionê, all in her morning dress.

'Is Blackbird at home?' the young man asked eagerly.

'Well, yes,' Ionê admitted, in somewhat dubious tones. 'But I don't quite know whether she'll see you or not. To tell you the truth, Henley, just of late Blackbird's been down—in very bad spirits.'

'What about?' Henley asked, with a most commiserating face.

'Oh, I can't say, I'm sure!' Ionê answered, not *quite* so sympathetically as Henley Stokes could have wished. 'It's a way she has, sometimes. Blackbird wouldn't be happy, don't you know, if she wasn't miserable.'

This was paradoxical, but true; and Henley admitted its force.

'There are no fresh laurel-leaves just now, you see,' he said, musing slowly to himself. 'I always thought, Ionê, Blackbird was never so well pleased or so comforted in soul as when she was busy making those investigations on laurel-leaves and the infusions she got out of them.'

Ionê was less interested in the subject than the young man from Pump Court. She led the way listlessly into Blackbird's laboratory.

'Here's Henley!' she said, with a brusque opening of the door. Blackbird gave a little start, and popped a bottle she was fingering into the cupboard at once in a somewhat flurried manner. But she stepped forward, flushing up rather more than was her wont.

'Oh, how kind of you to come round!' she said, taking his hand and trembling.

Henley Stokes seated himself, and drew his chair near hers. For awhile he talked nervously about various general subjects, screwing up courage all the time for the final plunge. At last, when Blackbird unconsciously gave him a good lead for the remark, he went on wistfully:

'Well, that was just what I came round about to-day, do you know. You remember, Blackbird, that morning last summer when I—when I spoke to you so, and you were so very, very kind to me'—Blackbird nodded petulantly—'you remember, you said we could never be engaged? Well, I've come round to-day to ask you plainly *why?* I'll take no excuse. You *must* answer me, Blackbird; I won't go away till you've answered me.'

As he said those words, Blackbird clenched her thin fingers hard and drove the nails into her palm. Then she looked up at him almost defiantly.

'Oh, Henley!' she cried, holding her breath, and half closing her big black eyes, 'I thought I told you then it was impossible—impossible. Why do you want to reopen it? All these times, ever since, when I've seen you from day to day, it's been so sweet to me to think you really cared for me, that I've gone on clinging to life—clinging to life in spite of myself. I thought you loved me too well to go worrying me with love. Don't spoil it all now by asking such horrid questions!'

The young man bent over her tenderly. He couldn't understand her, but indeed he loved her! How sweet and frail she looked! like some delicate piece of fine Dresden china.

'But I can't help it, darling!' he murmured, dropping his voice quite low, and looking deep into her dark eyes through the fringe of half-closed lashes. 'All these times, as you say, I've put it off and off, waiting anxiously from day to day, fearing I might vex you again; till, now Sacha and Trevor are married, I keep saying to my own heart—Why not, then, just as well myself and Blackbird?'

The words fell like a match on a heap of gunpowder. Blackbird opened her eyes suddenly, and fronted him with the face of one possessed. Her access of energy frightened him.

'Married!' she cried, flashing fire at him from both those glowing eyes. 'Married! Married! Married! Oh, Henley! I wonder *you*, who know and love me so well—for I'm *sure* you love me—I wonder you don't see for yourself the reason *why* I can't be married! If you knew how you were torturing me! If you knew how you were killing me! It's agony! agony! But there! you're a man—strong, virile, robust; how should you ever be able to gauge and fathom the feelings of such a girl as I am?'

'Then, you'll never marry me, Blackbird?' Henley cried, taken aback, but lifting her hand to his lips none the less, and pressing it there tenderly.

Blackbird accepted the caress with passive acquiescence. Nay more, she loved it. It was sweet to her to to be loved. It made her tingle with pleasure. But for all that, she drew back as she answered passionately:

'No, never, never, never! . . . And that's not all. Worse than that. You've broken my dream now. For days I've been expecting it. For days I've been dreading it. Now the thunderbolt has fallen. I was happy while you were merely content to love me. But when you talk of marriage—Henley, the bubble's burst. I can only sleep away. My life's gone from me.'

She was terribly agitated.

'What do you mean?' the young man cried, pressing her hand still harder. 'Oh, Blackbird, Blackbird, don't dismiss me without telling me at least the reason.'

Blackbird stood up and faced him. She was deadly pale by this time, and her lips trembled violently.

'I will tell you the reason,' she answered, with a terrible forced calm. 'I can't keep it from you any longer. I must out with it or die. I will tell you the reason. Henley, you're a man, and you love me as a woman. But will you have the truth? I'm not a woman at all—not a woman in the sense you mean—not a woman to be loved as a man wants to love her. I'm

only a little girl grown up, that's all; in brain and mind and intelligence a woman, but in body a child, no more fit to love or be loved in the way you think than a four-year-old baby. If I love at all it's with my brain, not with my heart or my body. . . . When you talk to me like a man—even you, who are so gentle and so patient and so kind—you simply frighten me. I haven't got the instincts Ionê and Sacha have. . . . How could it be else? Listen, here, dear Henley: I've thought of this day and night, till I know what I'm speaking of. All the woman that ever was in me, or ought to have been in me, has been educated out, crushed and killed by teaching. It's all gone off in music, or mathematics, or chemistry, or Greek. The rest of you are creatures of flesh and blood. I'm not even as you are. I'm all brain and nerves. The flesh and blood are bred out of me. I've nothing left to love you with.'

'But you *do* love me!' Henley Stokes murmured low, looking at her still admiringly.

'Yes, I *love* you, my darling—I *love* you!' Blackbird cried, trembling all over with joy and grief, and holding both his hands in hers, and thrilling through to the finger-tips. 'I love you all I can, and I love you to love me. I've been happier these few months than ever in all my life before. For the first time I've been happy. I've known what joy meant. I've *lived*, instead of merely existing and learning. But all the time a black shadow has disturbed my happiness. I knew it must come to an end at last—before long. I knew I was deceiving you. . . . For you wanted *a woman* to love and be loved by; and all you've got instead is an animated music-book—the leavings and relics of the higher education.'

Henley turned to her in a tremor of pity, and kissed her white lips. Just that once, in the exaltation of the moment, she allowed him. She almost imagined she could understand why women, real women, liked such strange caresses. The kiss coursed through and through her, rousing vague echoes in her limbs; but she felt it was wrong; she felt it was hopeless.

'There! there! that'll do!' she cried, breaking down half hysterically, and motioning him off with her hands.

'Don't ask me any more. Remember, this is final. I've been drilled and instructed from my childhood up till there's no power or spontaneity or life left in me. To love a man as he wants to be loved, you must have flesh and blood. I'm a spirit, that's all, in a casing of clothes. A voice—and a tired one. The only thing left for me now is to close my eyes, if I can, and sleep on for ever. Close my eyes, and sleep away, and never wake up again. For having once known *this*, there's nothing more on earth for me.'

She let his hands drop short; then just once, with a sudden impulse, transcending her own nature, she bent forward, glowing hot, and kissed both his wistful eyes with an impassioned pressure.

'I know what they want!' she cried, 'those dear, dear eyes; and I never could give it them. Good-bye, good-bye, kind friend—the only man on earth I ever could love, the only man on earth who ever could love me! Good-bye—for ever!'

And with a quick burst of tears she rushed all at once from the room like a wounded creature, leaving Henley alone, amazed and discomfited.

CHAPTER XLI.

LAUREL-LEAVES.

'SOME people, they tell me, are afraid of death. It was never so with me, dear Henley. It's life *I'm* afraid of. For awhile I endured it. I can endure it no longer. Good-night, loving heart! I hope I may sleep with no dreams to bother me.'

So Henley Stokes read next morning on a postcard, in a very firm hand. It was signed just 'Blackbird.' No more than those few words; but it made his heart sink. He looked at them and trembled. What could Blackbird mean by it?

Seizing his hat forthwith, he rushed out into the Strand. There he hailed a passing hansom.

'Drive quick to Victoria Street!'

He rang the bell of the flat. Ionê opened the door, bright and smiling as usual. Henley's heart came up into his mouth at the sight for joy. Then all was well, after all! He pressed her hand hard. Blackbird had only been terrifying him. If anything had happened, Ionê could never look so gay and cheerful as that. The very light in her merry eyes reassured him immensely.

Still, it was in a broken voice that he stammered out the question:

'And Blackbird—how is she?'

'Blackbird?' Ionê answered, half alarmed at his gaiety. 'Well, you're so early this morning, you see. It isn't nine o'clock yet. I'm only the housemaid, of course, so it doesn't matter for me; but you can't expect the ladies of the house to be up and dressed, ready to receive visitors, at such an unearthly hour. Besides, when Blackbird went to bed last night she asked us not to call her—to let her sleep on. She felt as if she should get some rest at last, she said. She's been sleepless lately, and she didn't want us on any account to wake her up or disturb her.'

Henley Stokes's heart stood still within him once more at those ominous words.

'Some rest at last!' he cried, turning paler than ever, and grasping a chair in his horror. 'Some rest at last! Oh, Ionê, didn't you guess—didn't you know what she meant? We must wake her up at once! We must go into her room and try to rouse her!'

As he spoke, he put the postcard into Ionê's hand without one word of explanation. Ionê read it, and broke at once into a sudden little cry.

'Sacha, Sacha!' she burst out, hurrying terrified down the passage; 'we must force open the door! Oh, look at it! look at it! Do you know what this means? Poor Blackbird has killed herself!'

In a moment, Owen and Sacha had rushed out into the passage, and stood together, all tremulous, in front of Blackbird's door. With one blow of his strong fist, Owen broke off the lock-fittings. It yielded instantly. They entered, hushed and awestruck—Owen first, then

Henley Stokes, then Ionê and Sacha. As they did so, Owen started. Henley gave a sharp gasp, and stood still on the threshold.

Within, very motionless, Blackbird lay across the bed, in a simple black grenadine evening dress, her feet just touching the ground, her head thrown on one side, as if listless, on the pillow. She was sleeping soundly—at rest at last. Her face was very white. Her thin hands were bloodless.

Owen was the first to move forward, with the solemn step a death-room seems to call forth automatically; he gazed hard at the poor child as she lay there in her loneliness. She was pallid, but peaceful. A little foam at the mouth, a slight blueness of the lips, were the sole signs of what had happened. Save for that, she looked merely as if she had fallen into a very deep sleep. He touched one hand reverently with inquiring fingers. It was cold as ice, but still soft and yielding.

By her side, on a little table, lay a corked bottle. Against it a piece of paper was conspicuously tilted:

'Don't touch, for Heaven's sake. Prussic acid. Very poisonous. The fumes would kill.'

They looked at it appalled, without saying a word to one another. Sacha took Owen's hand in hers. They paused and gazed at the beautiful calm face, more beautiful now it was at rest at last than ever it had been during the weariness of living. Tears stole slowly down their cheeks. Not one of them needed to ask why Blackbird had killed herself. They knew very well already. The wonder was rather why she hadn't done it long ago.

Weary, weary of a life that was a pain and a bitterness to her. Longing to be at rest. Too tired to do more than lie down and be well rid of it.

They stood there long in silence, gazing mutely at one another. Then Henley Stokes stepped forward, very solemnly and reverently, and kissed the white forehead once with a deep-drawn sigh. As he did so, he saw a little piece of paper lay crumpled up convulsively in the less conspicuous hand. He drew it forth half remorseful, as if afraid of disturbing poor Blackbird's peace. It was a twisted wee note, inscribed in pencil, 'For Henley.'

He opened it and read:

'Three o'clock, Wednesday morning.
'Just before taking the poison.

'DEAREST HENLEY,

'You have given me a few short months of the only happiness I ever knew in my poor little life. But of course it couldn't last. I knew it was delusive. It grieves me to think I must requite you so ill by giving you in return so much needless sorrow.'

On the centre table was a longer letter in an envelope, addressed to Sacha. Owen handed it to her without a word. Sacha opened it and read. The rest looked over her shoulder and followed in silence.

'Twelve, midnight.

'DEAR, DEAR, GOOD SACHA,

'I write to you most of all, because I know you will best understand me. Henley understands me, too; but, then, Henley knows so much I needn't write to *him*. So I set down these few words for you, to be read at the inquest. I suppose there'll be an inquest. They won't even let a poor tired girl lie down to sleep when she chooses, but they must drag her out publicly to ask why she lay down, and what she wanted rest for.

'*You* know I was tired, and how hard I found it to keep awake at all. *You* know how my life was a grief and a burden to me. What I wanted was just to put my hands behind my head and fling myself down on the soft sweet grass, with the warm sky above me, and the drowsy hum of the bees for a lullaby in my ear—to fall asleep then and there, and never, never wake up again! I couldn't do that; but I've done what I could. I've taken a sleeping-draught—or I mean soon to take it. It's a very sure and certain one. It acts instantaneously. I made it myself. It's called prussic acid.

'Sacha dear I don't need to ask *you* to forgive me. You understand me so well you won't want explanations. But I'd like you to explain how it happened to the jury. *They* won't understand, of course, those twelve dreadful men—stolid, thick-headed, commonplace. They'll say, "She was mad." Oh, Sacha, don't let them call me that. I'm so sensible, so logical. It would give me bad

dreams in my bed under the green grass. Make them see I was just tired. So tired, so weary, it was unreasonable for me to do anything else on earth but fall asleep with fists clenched like a drowsy baby.

'For years I've done nothing but learn, learn, learn! I was worked from my babyhood. They said I was clever, and must develop my talents. When my talents were developed, there was nothing else left for me. The woman was dead; the brain alone remained. I could compose, I could sing, I could read and write and reason; but live or love or enjoy myself I couldn't.

'And I wanted to love. I wanted to be loved. Oh, I wanted it so badly; but don't tell them about *that*, dear. Don't read *that* at the inquest. You and Henley can understand. For the rest of them, no matter.

'There was only one thing in life I had energy left for. I longed for sleep so much that I made my mind up months and months ago I *must* have a sleeping-draught. I read up about them all—all the draughts that make you sleep and never wake up again; most of them were slow, long, doubtful, ineffective. But I found there was one that never failed or hung fire. That one was prussic acid. I determined to get some and keep it by my side for use when I wanted it; but they wouldn't let me buy any. There's a conspiracy in England to keep people awake against their will, whether they're tired or not. You mayn't buy a sleeping-draught, even for use on the spot; so the only way left was for me to make it.

'That compelled me to learn chemistry. I learned it, and with a will. I was so tired, but I could muster up energy enough and to spare, if it was to bring me my sleeping-draught. I worked away at it hard, and soon learnt the best plans for making prussic acid.

'Do you remember, all last summer, I was always messing about in the laboratory with laurel-leaves? Well, laurel-leaves contain amygdalin, and from amygdalin you can distil hydrocyanic acid—that's the chemical name of it. I might have made it from drugs, but this way was prettier. I distilled quite a lot—enough to put you all to sleep, if you feel too weary. But there! you have health, and strength, and flesh and blood to love

with. You're not a ghost, like me. You're a real live woman.

'When you married it made me feel the difference more keenly than ever; and yesterday, when Henley asked *me* to marry him, I said to myself, "The end has come now. I can't stand it any longer, this mockery of life. I won't live, a child, to be treated like a woman, when I know I'm a ghost, a phantom, a nullity. I won't spoil this dear man's life for him by standing in his way. I'll lie down and rest at last; I'll take my sleeping-draught."

'I meant to have taken it long ago, but one thing put me off. The little spark of womanhood that was still left within me after so much education flared up in a dying flicker when Henley was kind to me. It made me feel how delicious it must be to love and be loved. Even the vague little shadow of it I could clutch at and understand made life worth living for a few short months to me. Only, I knew I was wrong. I knew I was sacrificing that dear kind heart to a child's empty fancy. Yesterday, with a breath, the bubble burst; and I thought, for his sake, and for my own rest's sake, I must be done with it all now, and take my sleeping-draught.

'I shall take it at three o'clock, with a thought for you all. Good-bye, dear heart.

'Your affectionate

'BLACKBIRD.'

Henley flung himself in a chair and buried his face in his hands.

'Poor child, poor child!' he cried aloud. 'And to think I should have killed her!'

Sacha bent over the pale corpse with big tears in her eyes.

'Not you, not you, dear Henley,' she said, gazing at it; 'but her parents and teachers.'

And as she raised her eyes once more, they fell on the words Blackbird had painted round her room:

'Thou art more than the gods who number the days of our temporal breath,
For they give labour and slumber; but thou, Proserpina, death.'

CHAPTER XLII.

BAD MATERIAL.

On the Continent, meanwhile, Mr. Hayward's success had been partial and inconclusive.

The very morning of his arrival in Paris he went hastily round from his comfortable hotel in the Rue de la Paix to a shabby street on the south side, to get back, if possible, into his own hands the incriminating envelope which contained Owen Cazalet's name and address in England. For this purpose he meant to introduce himself at once to his brother Nihilist as Ruric Brassoff; for nobody on earth, save Madame Mireff alone, was aware of the identity of the exiled Prince with Mr. Lambert Hayward, senior partner in the firm of Mortimer and Co., in Bond Street. Had others known it, needless to say, the identification of Owen with Sergius Selistoff the younger would have been very plain sailing. But Mr. Hayward, who did nothing by halves, had kept his English home and occupation discreetly concealed from the prying gaze of all his Nihilist allies; so he ran no risk now of implicating Owen by any other means than the sealed envelope.

Arrived at the Rue des Saints Pères, he climbed a high staircase *au cinquième*, with a beating heart, and knocking at a closed door, asked for Valerian Stefanovic.

He was shown at once into a barely-furnished *salon*. His fellow-conspirator rose from his seat by a table at the far end to receive him.

'I am Ruric Brassoff,' Mr. Hayward said simply, as the door closed behind him.

Stefanovic, without altering one muscle of his inscrutable face, bowed a non-committing bow. The Chief was taken aback by so cool a reception. Middle-aged, wiry, suspicious, a lean and hungry man, with a moustache like Mephistopheles, this Valerian Stefanovic seemed the very embodiment of the calmly sardonic or calculating type of conspirator. Not at all the sort of person to be lightly moved, Mr. Hayward felt, by superficial blandishments. The Chief looked at him, and

despaired. It was clear, if he was to succeed at all in his present undertaking, he must succeed, not by frankness, but by wile and stratagem.

It took him some time, of course, at the outset to persuade Stefanovic at all that he was really and truly Ruric Brassoff. Appearances were against him. The sardonic conspirator for some minutes stood entirely on the defensive, frankly incredulous. But even after this initial difficulty had been in part overcome, there remained the far harder task of inducing his ally to give up the all-important letter.

In despair of fair means, Mr. Hayward after a time began to feign distrust on his own side, and to doubt about the safety of the precious sealed envelope. Thus put upon his mettle, Stefanovic, after some brief parleying, produced the challenged document from a little locked drawer, and held it out cautiously before his visitor's eye, with his own two hands still carefully guarding it.

Mr. Hayward scanned him close. He was a lithe, thin man—no match for a Brassoff physically. Quick as lightning, without a word spoken, the Nihilist Chief pounced down upon him unawares, and, seizing both wrists in his own, wrenched them rapidly round till the envelope dropped from Stefanovic's grasp. Then, stooping down before the man had recovered from his pain and surprise, he picked it up in haste and tore it open. The seal was intact; so far, good; the envelope, then, had not been tampered with.

A good fire burned bright in the open grate of the little *salon*. Without a second's hesitation, Mr. Hayward flung the incriminating paper with Owen's name and address into the midst of the flame. It blazed up instantly, burnt to white ash in a moment, and then flew up the chimney, a thin and twinkling sheet of spark-bespangled tissue.

With a wild shout, Stefanovic, half wondering, half comprehending what had happened, sprang forward in a fury, and fronted his Chief, hot and trembling.

'This is treachery!' he cried aloud, with a very red face. 'Treachery! Treason! Chicanery! You could have no

good ground for such trickery as that! Not from Ruric Brassoff himself will I stand this treatment. And you are *not* Ruric Brassoff. You're a spy of the Czar's.' He snatched a revolver hurriedly from a cabinet by his side, and cocked it point-blank at him. 'Pretender!' he shrieked in his impotent rage. 'Liar! Hypocrite! *Mouchard!*'

Quick as thought, Mr. Hayward drew a revolver in turn—a mere toy of a weapon to look at, but perfectly finished and fitted throughout, a fine triumph of workmanship. He pulled it from his pocket and covered his man with it in his right; with his left he dashed back Stefanovic's clumsier pistol.

'Hold, hold, my friend,' he said shortly, clasping the man's delicate wrist with that iron grip of his. 'If you struggle, I shoot. I'm your superior officer. It is not for such as you to judge of my acts and my orders. The Society as a whole has alone the right to judge of them. If you fire, you spoil all. You bring everything to light. You explode the fraternity. Take time to consider. This is a critical point in our history. Hunt me down, if you will, after due deliberation. But if you shoot me now, in hot blood, what, I ask, will you have accomplished? All Paris and Petersburg will know to-morrow that Valerian Stefanovic has shot Ruric Brassoff, the tyrant's chief enemy, in a private quarrel. Then everything would come out. The Cause would be betrayed. Poor Russia would be lost. And Alexis Selistoff would have good reason to laugh in his sleeve in his comfortable office in the Third Section.'

Awed by that strong, calm voice, Stefanovic paused and hesitated. He looked at his man dubiously.

Mr. Hayward still held the tiny revolver pointed straight at his follower's head. As Stefanovic doubted, his Chief, edging forward, gave once more a sudden curl to his wrist, wrenched the revolver from his grasp with that powerful grip as of a Cossack hand, and flung it with a sweep to the other side of the little *salon*. It alighted harmlessly. Then, still covering his man cautiously with his own toy-like weapon, he went on in a quieter voice:

'Valerian Stefanovic, don't venture to bandy words or dispute my orders. I am still your commander. But things have turned out differently from my expectations. I don't trust you so implicitly now as I trusted you some months ago. You must accept your position, or blow everything to atoms. We are standing this moment on the edge of a volcano. A brawl between you and me in a Paris lodging-house would be fatal to the Cause. You must see that for yourself. Don't insist upon this folly.'

Stefanovic, undecided, fell back into an easy-chair, and glared at him sullenly.

'I don't know who you are,' he muttered low, with lurking anger in his voice. 'I'm not sure my plain duty isn't to leap at your throat and choke you.'

By this time Mr. Hayward had regained all his natural calmness.

'You're not sure,' he answered with resolution. 'And where you're not sure, Valerian Stefanovic, the wise man's obvious course is, not to be precipitate, but to wait and take counsel. Will you, on your sole responsibility, wreck a whole organization? Will you destroy your country? Pause and think at least before you do it. And remember, the man who bids you pause and think is the Chief of the Revolution—Ruric Brassoff.'

Stefanovic rocked himself up and down in the chair, as regardless of the pistol whose muzzle the elder man still held pointed at his temples as if it had been a child's popgun.

'Well, Ruric Brassoff,' he murmured slowly at last, 'if Ruric Brassoff you *are*, I believe you to be a traitor. But I'll pause and reflect, as you say, for I recognise in your hand the one that so long has issued me orders. Still, I won't let the Cause suffer by my own uncertainty. I give you fair warning, I shall write to our friends in Petersburg and Moscow to inform them of this incident. I'll tell them exactly by what *ruse* you cheated me. It will be for them to decide. If *they* think as I think, then'—he rose as he spoke, and faced the revolver fearlessly—'then, Ruric Brassoff,' he said, pointing at him with one skinny finger, like embodied Fate, 'your brains will be scattered on the floor with as little compunction

as you'd scatter mine this minute if I refused to obey you.'

Mr. Hayward let the revolver drop slightly as he answered in a very quiet tone:

'That's well, friend Stefanovic — very well, very sensible. You speak now with the voice of a good revolutionist. *Death to the traitor* is the law of our being, the bond of our society. On no other basis can a conspiracy defend itself against internal treason. I accept it myself; kill me if I prove false; but I don't want to die till I've done the work that still remains for me. And I like you all the better and trust you all the more for the bold, frank way you've spoken to-day to me. If you'd shot me—well and good—you'd have committed an error of judgment; but I confess you would have been right in the main impulse that prompted you.'

He hated himself for his duplicity and backsliding as he said it. On his own code of ethics he knew Stefanovic was right, and he himself was wrong. He admired the man for his courage, his steadfastness, his devotion. This was the true Nihilist strain. This was an ally to be proud of. The revolutionist within him recognised and rejoiced in a brother soul.

'Well done,' he said, after a short pause. 'You did right, friend Valerian.'

But the other man sat down again, undisarmed in soul, and confronted him once more with a steely eye of suspicion.

'That's all very well in its way,' he said sulkily; 'but I wish I'd shot, all the same. Stone dead has no fellow. However, to prevent open scandal I waive that point. Only, mind you, Ruric Brassoff, or whoever else you may be, you shall not play this trick again with impunity elsewhere. I shall write to all the heads of our organization in Russia to warn them at once of your vile plan of action. You won't get any more sealed envelopes by treachery, I can promise you. I shall write to each one of them—Ossinsky, Fomenko, Clemens, Lisogub, everybody! They shall know how to deal with you when you present yourself before them.'

A danger-signal loomed distinct before Mr. Hayward's

inner eye—a double danger. True Nihilist that he was still, in spite of this episode, he didn't want to betray his Cause to the Third Section. And in his burning anxiety for Owen Cazalet's safety, he didn't want young Sergius Selistoff's alias and address to fall into his Uncle Alexis's hands at St. Petersburg. But unless Stefanovic would be warned in time, that might easily happen. For he might write, among others, to Ossinsky of Kieff, whom the police, as Madame Mireff wired to him, had lately arrested.

With genuine alarm and interest gleaming bright in his eye, he leaned eagerly forward.

'Take care what you do,' he said in a voice of solemn warning. 'Whoever else you write to, don't write to Ossinsky. Our trusted friend was arrested at Kieff some ten days ago, as I learn by telegram from Olga Mireff. If you write to him, your letter will fall into the hands of the spies; and then all will be up with both of us —with the Cause—with Russia.'

'That's false!' Stefanovic answered, starting up and facing him with clenched fists, like a tiger at bay. 'That's false! You're a liar! If Ossinsky had been arrested I should have heard of it at once. Who would hear before me? You're trying to intimidate me. You're a spy—you're a *mouchard!*'

Mr. Hayward drew a telegram triumphantly from his pocket, and handed it to the man with a smile. Stefanovic glanced at it sideways.

'Just arrived across the German frontier. Couldn't communicate before. Am returning now post-haste to England. Very serious news. Ossinsky arrested ten days ago at Kieff. All is known, except the English name of Sergius Selistoff's son. That they can't find out. But the danger is great. Smuggle him away at once, for Heaven's sake.

'Olga Mireff.'

'You see,' Mr. Hayward said gravely, 'I have good reason for my action.'

But Valerian Stefanovic gazed at him fixedly with

stern Machiavelian eyes as he answered, between his teeth, under his wiry moustache:

'This is false. This is forgery. This is lies, and you know it. If it were true, Olga Mireff would have telegraphed to *me*. I'll be careful what I do. I'll compromise nobody. But, Ruric Brassoff or spy, I distrust you—I distrust you!'

CHAPTER XLIII.

TO MOSCOW.

It was with a heavy heart indeed that Mr. Hayward returned that morning to his comfortable hotel in the Rue de la Paix. For his chance of saving Owen and Ionê depended entirely upon the recovery, unopened, of the sealed envelopes. But the dangers in the way were now great and twofold. If Stefanovic wrote direct to Michael Fomenko at Moscow, that brother revolutionist would inform the whole Nihilist party in Russia and the West of their Chief's defection; the envelope would be broken, its secret divulged, and no stone would be left unturned by the entire organization to punish Owen Cazalet for his desertion of their common principles. And if, on the other hand, Stefanovic wrote direct to Ossinsky at Kieff, then the letter would inevitably fall into the hands of General Selistoff's spies, and Owen's life would be rendered doubly insecure by the hostility alike of the Revolutionists and of the Russian Government. Both parties at once would pursue him as a traitor with relentless energy.

What annoyed Mr. Hayward most, however, in this difficult crisis, was his inability to get at once to Berlin and Moscow. He was longing to go and to communicate with Olga Mireff, who might be able, he hoped, either to intervene on his behalf with Valerian Stefanovic, or to prevent the man's letters ever reaching Kieff and so being seized *en route* by the representatives of the Third Section. Madame Mireff's peculiar position as the supposed friend and ally of General Selistoff and the Czar

made her aid especially desirable at such a juncture. Sharing, as she did, the secrets of both sides, she was able from time to time to do the Cause good service which none but such a clever and resourceful diplomatist would have had the power to render it. But, unfortunately, on the very threshold, delays and difficulties arose over the question of passports. Mr. Hayward was determined to go to Russia, and brought with him for the purpose the usual perfunctory Foreign Office document, issued in the name of Henry Mortimer, a British subject—his former partner. It was necessary, however, to get the *visa* of the Russian embassy at Paris, and over this *visa* unexpected trouble cropped up, which it took Mr. Hayward two clear days to surmount, not to mention a certain sum of very hard swearing. The Nihilist Chief wasn't a man to fret and fume over trifles, but this inopportune delay caused him no small anxiety. For perhaps before he could reach Berlin Stefanovic's letters would be well on their way for Kieff and Moscow, and Owen's fate would be sealed, either by Michael Fomenko or by Alexis Selistoff.

At last, however, all difficulties were smoothed away; hard swearing produced its due reward, the passport was correctly examined and *visé;* and Henry Mortimer, gentleman, a British subject, on his travels on the Continent, under the protection of all foreign princes, potentates, and powers, took the fast through train from the Gare du Nord for Berlin.

He went straight on arrival to the Continental, the big fashionable hotel opposite the Friedrichstrasse railway-station. Madame Mireff was there already waiting for him by appointment. Mr. Hayward lost no time in seeing her, and explaining in part the object of his visit. Olga Mireff listened, all respectful attention. Not a shadow of mistrust disturbed her perfect confidence. For her, at least, it was clear, the Cause and the man were one; women can grasp the abstract only through the aid of a concrete form; she had so implicit a belief in Ruric Brassoff that whatever he said was to her the embodied voice of all free Russia.

As for the Chief, he broke his plan to her by very tenta-

tive stages. Events had occurred, he said, as he told her in London, which rendered it impossible for Owen Cazalet, who was also, as she knew, Sergius Selistoff the younger, to enter the English diplomatic service. He wouldn't explain to her in full what those events were; he wouldn't defend his action; he was Ruric Brassoff, that, he hoped, would be enough for her. Olga Mireff could trust him. It had become necessary, however, as a consequence of this change of front, and of Ossinsky's arrest, that he should go to Russia in person, in order to recover possession of certain compromising papers which might otherwise cause both Owen and himself very serious trouble. And he was going there almost at once, direct to Moscow.

Madame Mireff gave a start.

'To Russia!' she cried. 'To Moscow! Oh, Ruric Brassoff, no! Let me go in your place. Don't expose your sacred head. Don't trust yourself in that country.'

Mr. Hayward lifted his hand, palm open before him, deprecatingly.

'Not that name, Olga—not that name,' he whispered low. 'Here I am Henry Mortimer, a British subject, But I must go, all the same. To Russia. To Moscow. No one on earth but myself could perform my business.'

'The risk's so great!' Madame cried, trembling with anxiety. 'In Russia you have everywhere to run the gauntlet of so much police espionage. Whereas, for me, all's made so easy. I've Alexis Selistoff's recommendation wherever I go. I've the weight of the aristocracy and the bureaucracy at my back. I have but to show my card, and the mere name, "Olga Mireff," is my passport everywhere. Nobody thinks of questioning me. I'm the friend of the Administration.'

Mr. Hayward shook his head gravely.

'You're a faithful adherent, Olga,' he said, with that calm air of command that sat upon him so easily—'a most faithful adherent. But how often shall I have to tell you that your zeal at times outruns your discretion? I don't ask you for such aid. I ask for obedience. Listen well to what I say, and make no private suggestions.'

A little red spot burned fiery bright on Olga Mireff's

cheek; but she gave no rebellious answer. Her reverence for Ruric Brassoff was too deep to permit it.

'I forgot,' she answered meekly. 'I rate your life so high that I can't bear, without a protest, to hear of your risking it, if any other of less value would answer as well. But you, of course, know best. I am all obedience.'

She bowed her head and blushed crimson. Mr. Hayward watched her close, as he went on to explain to her in tentative terms what he wished her to do, with the air of a general who issues orders to his attentive subordinates. She was to remain in Berlin for the present under her own name, and he would telegraph progress to her daily as Henry Mortimer. The telegram would bear reference to an imaginary illness of an imaginary son, and would mean merely that all was going well up-to-date—no danger expected. But if any day no telegram arrived before twelve o'clock noon, then she would know he was either arrested or in flight for his life. In that case she was to proceed by the first train to St. Petersburg, and to call at once on General Selistoff, so as to worm out the circumstances. She could make an excuse for her unexpected return by giving the General some unimportant unsigned intercepted letter from a London Nihilist, and pretending to have discovered from it that Ruric Brassoff was in Russia. That would prove her watchfulness.

'And if I'm arrested and taken to Petersburg,' the Chief went on very solemnly, 'I shall no doubt be examined in Alexis Selistoff's office. Or perhaps he may come to Moscow to prevent removing me. Well, take care you're there; be cautious, be firm, and watch what I say, to govern yourself accordingly.'

Madame Mireff's lips twitched; but she answered, without any apparent qualm:

'Yes, I will. You can trust me.'

Mr. Hayward took slowly from his inner breast-pocket a little revolver of very fine workmanship. It was the same with which he had confronted Valerian Stefanovic in his rooms at Paris. He handed the pretty toy across to her—a marvel of modern skill, the final flower in the evolution of pocket firearms.

'Take this, Olga,' he said calmly. 'It's very precious. You can smuggle it across the frontier more easily than I can. You won't be searched. I may be. At any rate, take it. I may have need of it in Petersburg, if ever we meet there. It's a beautiful little instrument. Carry it about with you always in the bosom of your dress, wherever you go, for we can never tell beforehand at what minute it may be wanted.'

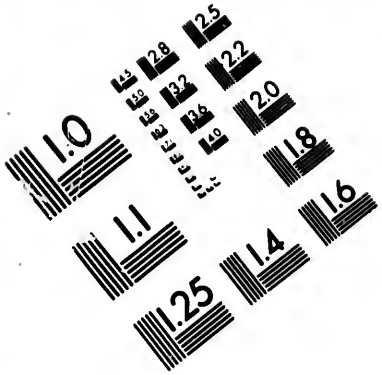
Madame Mireff took it reverently, raised his hand to her lips, and kissed it as she did so. Mr. Hayward accepted the kiss with all the dignity of a monarch. It was clear she was stanch; woman-like, she shone brightest in personal devotion. No qualms like Stefanovic's there; no doubts; no suspicions.

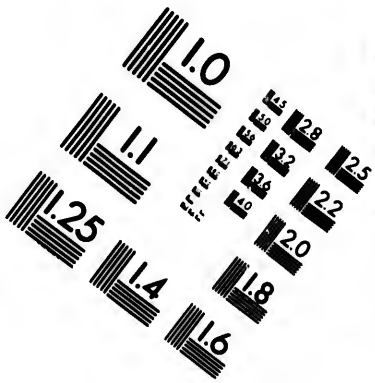
'I will,' she answered once more, still holding his hand in hers. 'Dear friend, I may not say your name aloud, it seems, but I utter it in my heart. I am yours, for Russia. I give you my body; I give you my soul. Take me; do as you will with me.'

She looked at him with her great eyes. Mr. Hayward bowed silently. Then they talked on for some minutes more, the Chief giving directions in a most matter-of-fact voice—for he wouldn't give way—how Madame Mireff was to behave under certain contingencies, and Madame listening to them with the eagerness of a young girl to her lover. At last he turned to her suddenly, and asked in a different tone:

'And have you seen anything of our friends since you've been here in Berlin?'

'Very little; very few of them,' Madame answered, coming back to herself from a dreamy cloudland. 'Everybody here knows me as the Czar's agent in England, and I have to be careful accordingly; for the two or three faithful in Berlin and Charlottenburg are suspected by the police, and watched very closely. But I *did* just manage to have a word or two in private with my cousin Tania to-day, and by the way, Tania told me a piece of bad news, which this more important matter of yours half put out of my head for the moment, but which you certainly ought to know at once. It was about Ossinsky's arrest, or, rather, one of its conse-





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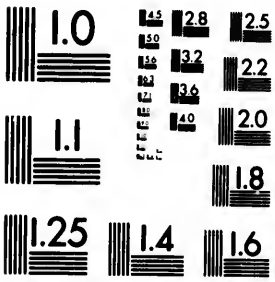

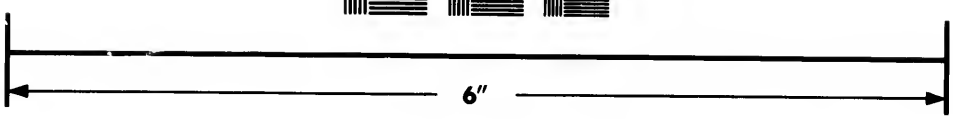

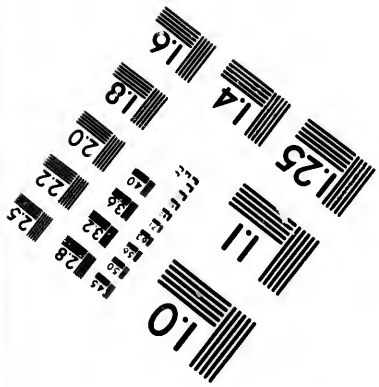

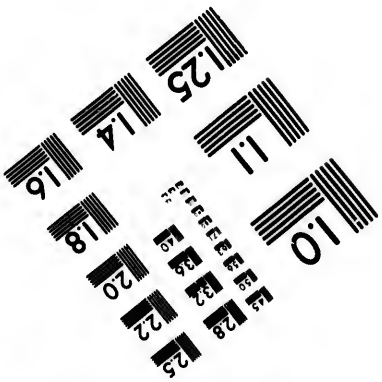

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quences. Tania hadn't heard Ossinsky was taken; for some reason or other our friends at Kieff seemed afraid to write or telegraph to her, so she committed, quite unwittingly, a most unfortunate mistake. She sent on letters to Ossinsky, addressed to her here, which of course will fall now into the hands of Alexis Selistoff's myrmidons.'

Mr. Hayward gave a start of surprise and alarm.

'Letters to Ossinsky?' he exclaimed, taken aback. 'From whom and from where? This is serious indeed. Did she know their contents?'

Madame saw he was deeply moved.

'From Paris, I think,' she answered, trembling. 'From Valerian Stefanovic—so Tania told me. He wrote to her, urging her strongly to forward these letters, which he said were important, to Ossinsky at Kieff, and to Fomenko at Moscow. So she forwarded them at once by the usual channels. I don't know the contents, though. Stefanovic told Tania nothing more about them than that they were of immediate and pressing necessity.'

Mr. Hayward rose from his seat and paced up and down his room in a turmoil of doubt and fear—not for himself, but for Owen.

'This is terrible!' he cried at last. 'You can't think what she's done. Ossinsky's letters would, of course, be seized at Kieff. They would doubtless contain some allusion to the other Stefanovic had sent to Fomenko at Moscow. Fomenko would be arrested, too, and with him would be arrested most damaging papers. But that's not all. Before he could be taken, he might do much harm. He might divulge to others a fundamental secret I wished kept most inviolable. He might ruin all; he might explode the whole mine. I must go on at once by the first train to Moscow.'

Madame Mireff started to her feet. The woman within her overcame her.

'No, no!' she cried, flinging her arms round him in a transport of terror. 'You mustn't! you mustn't! For Russia's sake, you must stop. Don't venture to go. Don't expose yourself to this danger!'

A deadly pallor spread over Ruric Brassoff's white face. For Russia's sake! What a mockery! when he was sacrificing Russia to Ionê and Owen. He unwound her arms slowly; he stood erect and immovable.

'For Russia's sake,' he said in a very cold, stern voice, for he was sentencing himself to death, 'I must go; I must give myself up—I must brave the unspeakable. For Russia's sake I must die. It's all I can do now for her.'

CHAPTER XLIV.

TRAPS FOR FOXES.

Alexis Selistoff sat in a very good humour in his cabinet at the Bureau of Police in St. Petersburg. 'Twas with evident gusto that the chief of the Third Section twirled the ends of his gray moustache between his big bronzed fingers. Tall, well set, erect, a great giant to look upon, with his commanding face and clear-cut classical features, Alexis Selistoff seemed the very picture of what Owen Cazalet might become after forty-five years of military service in Russia. To the towering height and colossal limbs of all his kin, he added the fine bearing and stern, methodical air of a well-trained soldier. But in spite of his cheerful mien, a grim smile played round the corners of those cruel thin lips.

'This is good, Nikita,' he murmured musically to his chief clerk, in pleased and ruminating tones. 'We've run our vermin to earth at last! We shall cage them soon, now, these burrowing underground foxes!'

'Number Four still baffles us, though,' the chief clerk remarked pensively.

'Number Four still baffles us,' Alexis Selistoff echoed, with another twirl at the waxed gray ends; 'but the rest's all plain sailing. It was clear, even to start with, from Ossinsky's papers, that we have to deal here with a plot of that reptile Ruric Brassoff's. It was clear the ringleader had communicated some secret of prime importance to three other persons, and three others only.

That secret, I take it for granted, had reference to this boy or young man, designated in their cipher as Number Five Hundred. Now, Number Five Hundred, whoever he may be, is living in England. And there we can set Madame Mireff on the trail to catch him.'

'Has it ever occurred to your Excellency to consider,' the chief clerk ventured to suggest with very tentative hesitation, 'that Number Five Hundred might not impossibly be——'

With a terrible frown, Alexis Selistoff cut him short.

'Sir!' he thundered out, turning round upon him as a terrier turns on a wounded rat, and annihilating him with one glance from those formidable eyes of his. 'Keep your suggestions till they're asked for. How dare you presume to dictate? Don't forget your place. And be careful how you implicate members of important families.'

For though Alexis Selistoff didn't mind acknowledging (with a shudder) to Olga Mireff, a noblewoman born, and his own equal in rank, that his brother Sergius's son was a possible traitor and Nihilist, he couldn't bring himself to endure that a mere departmental clerk like this fellow Nikita should dare to cast aspersions of so damning a character upon the nephew and heir of his superior officer. And he felt instinctively sure his subordinate was on the very point of saying, 'Has it ever occurred to your Excellency to consider that Number Five Hundred might not impossibly be your Excellency's own nephew, Sergius Selistoff the younger?' That was an insult no issue of the Selistoff blood ever brooked for a moment from a whipper-snapper of a secretary.

The chief clerk withered up. He retired into his shell.

'Your Excellency was observing?' he said with the cowed air of a whipped spaniel.

Alexis Selistoff leaned back in his swinging chair and composed himself.

'I was observing,' he went on, still somewhat ruffled by the *contretemps*, 'that from the very first we knew Ossinsky to be one of three persons entrusted by Ruric Brassoff with some fatal secret. These latest letters, just intercepted at Kieff and forwarded here this morning,

supply us with two new facts of considerable value. They show us conclusively that the second of the three persons is Valerian Stefanovic, a refugee at Paris; and Valerian Stefanovic has now lost the clue. We have thus only one person left of the original three, the person denoted in the cipher as Number Four. And Number Four, we now know, must be living at Moscow.'

'Unless we can get Number Four's real name and address,' Nikita put in timidly, 'I don't see—subject to your Excellency's opinion—that the present find brings us much nearer identifying him.'

'Then *I* do,' General Selistoff answered, scanning one of the papers close with his keen eye like a ferret's. 'I see a great deal. I see my way out of it. I see this means not only that we shall catch Number Four, and crush this particular plot—which is in itself no small advantage—but also that we stand a fair chance at last of discovering and arresting Ruric Brassoff.'

'In my humble opinion,' the chief clerk said deferentially, 'Prince Ruric Brassoff will never dare to show his face again in Russia.'

'I'm not so sure of that,' the General answered with decision, still gazing hard at the crabbed square of cipher. 'It's clear, from all these letters contain, that Four Hundred and Seventy-five is, to say the least of it, a very important person. Now, Four Hundred and Seventy-five was in Paris last week, and had an interview in the Rue des Saints Pères with the man Stefanovic. As Stefanovic believed, Four Hundred and Seventy-five, at the time of writing, was then on his way to Kieff and Moscow. No other person, I assume, except Ruric Brassoff could be spoken of in terms of such profound secrecy. For even while Stefanovic denounces and declaims against Four Hundred and Seventy-five as a traitor to the Cause, he is obviously terrified for his own safety; he fears Four Hundred and Seventy-five's power and Four Hundred and Seventy-five's vengeance. Now, who should that be if it's not Ruric Brassoff?' He scanned the letter still closer, then jotted down a stray word or two casually on a blotting-pad. 'Ha, ha! See here!' he exclaimed in surprise, holding the paper up

triumphantly. 'Look what I've discovered now. By the cipher, Forty-seven would, of course, be B, and Five would be R. They reverse their initials. That gives you B. R.—equals R. B.—Ruric Brassoff.'

'It looks very like it,' the chief clerk answered cautiously, surveying the paper.

'Very like it!' Alexis Selistoff went on, delighted at his own intuition. 'Tut, tut, tut, man! It's the thing itself. We're on his track, that's certain. These letters imply that other communications to the same effect were sent by the same means to Number Four at Moscow. Number One doesn't exist; Number Two's Stefanovic; Number Three's Ossinsky; Number Four—well, Number Four we shall know to-morrow. I see a clear means for getting at him directly.'

'You do?' the chief clerk exclaimed.

'Yes, I do,' the General answered. 'See here.' He raised one finger with didactic conclusiveness. 'The man Stefanovic, when he sent these letters from Paris, was clearly unaware that Ossinsky had been arrested a fortnight ago at Kieff. So also was the person or persons unknown who redirected them on from Berlin or Charlottenburg. If Ruric Brassoff—for we'll take it for granted for the present Number Four Hundred and Seventy-five *is* Ruric Brassoff—if Ruric Brassoff remains also unaware of the fact, then he'll come on direct to Ossinsky's house at Kieff—and there we'll catch him easily. But it isn't likely that'll happen. The people at Kieff would be sure to communicate at once the fact of Ossinsky's arrest to that mysterious woman, ciphered as Number Forty-three, whom Madame Mireff has followed about so indefatigably round Europe, and whom she tracked the other day to a house in Berlin. Number Forty-three would, in turn, no doubt, communicate it at once to Ruric Brassoff. So Ruric Brassoff won't go to Kieff; but he *will* go, unless I'm immensely mistaken, to Moscow.'

'Put his head into the lion's mouth?' the chief clerk murmured incredulously.

'And get it bitten off—yes!' General Selistoff answered with warmth. 'See here, Nikita. You don't know that man as well as I do. He was eighteen months in my

own regiment in the Caucasus. He'd do or dare anything. If Ruric Brassoff wants to come to Russia, to Russia Ruric Brassoff will certainly come. And he'd walk down the Newski Prospect at three in the afternoon, with a flower in his buttonhole, if every policeman in Petersburg was sharp on the look-out for him at all the street corners.'

'But your Excellency's plan is——?' Nikita asked in suspense.

'This. You shall carry it out yourself. Why, nothing could be easier. You take the first train across the German frontier. If we telegraph from Petersburg or Moscow, that would excite suspicion. So you get out at Königsberg, or Eydtkuhnen, or where you will, and send a message in cipher to Stefanovic at Paris, signing it Number Three, which is Ossinsky's right signature. Here's your telegram. I'll write it out. Strike while the iron's hot. The sooner we put this plan into execution the better.'

He dipped a pen hastily into the ink-bottle by his side, and scribbled down a few lines.

'Stefanovic, 28, Rue des Saints Pères, Paris. Just across the frontier. Letter, instructions to hand. Rumoured arrest entirely unfounded. Police on the track. Telegraph in same cipher, at once, to Number Four at Moscow. His letters have gone wrong. Send openly to him by name. No danger at all. Delay may be fatal.

'NUMBER THREE, EYDTKUHNEN.'

Alexis Selistoff surveyed his handicraft with a quiet smile of cruel satisfaction.

'That'll do, I flatter myself,' he said, handing it across to Nikita, 'when it's put into cipher.'

The chief clerk ran his eye over it, enchanted.

'Capital, Excellency!' he answered, rubbing his hands softly together at the well-planned ruse. 'He'll telegraph back, of course, to Number Four, by his real name and address; and you'll instruct the telegraph administration to intercept the message.'

'Quite so,' the General answered, still grimly trium-

phant. 'I fancy it's a good card, and if it turns up trumps we ought to be able to catch, not only this insignificant Number Four, whoever he may be, but what's much more important, Ruric Brassoff himself in person also.'

'You think so?' Nikita mused interrogatively.

'Think? I'm almost sure of it. Look your facts in the face. Ruric Brassoff's well on his way to Moscow before now, and we'll watch for him carefully at Number Four's address, whenever we find it. . . . Mind, no precipitancy, Nikita; caution, caution, caution! Don't try to arrest Number Four, however sure you may be of him, without my leave. What I want is not so much *him* as Ruric Brassoff. It's clear Ruric Brassoff is at present going the rounds of his fellow-conspirators for some very serious and important purpose. Sooner or later he'll get on to Moscow. We must watch and wait. Better bide our own time. . . . Now go and work that telegram out into the cipher.'

CHAPTER XLV.

À LA RUSSE.

It isn't so easy for a 'contraband person,' as they say in Russia, to get across the frontier to Moscow unobserved. Even the familiar tweed suit of the British tourist, however large its checks, doesn't suffice to protect one. Mr. Hayward was so conscious, indeed, of the numberless difficulties which lay in his way, that on second thoughts he didn't attempt to go by the direct route, *viâ* Wilna and Minsk, but took the cross-country train instead, by Dunaburg and Smolensk. At the last little town he descended for the night at the second-rate hotel—accommodation is bad off the main lines, of course—meaning to continue his journey next day to Moscow. But Russia is Russia. Along certain familiar tourist tracks, it is true, the police and the public are fairly accustomed by this time to the inexplicable vagaries of the Western traveller; and though all foreign visitors are duly noted

and numbered and kept in view by the authorities, from the moment they arrive till they leave the country, they are not openly molested by minute or obtrusive police supervision. Off the beaten track, however, a stranger is a rarity, and he has to account for his presence and his business in the place to the local magnates by a most stringent inquisition. Mr. Hayward soon found he had committed a grievous error in making that ill-advised detour by Dunaburg. The authorities were most curious as to his reasons for adopting so unusual a route. Why had he turned so far out of his way if he was going at last to Moscow? Why had he stopped the night at such a place as Smolensk? Why did he want to see anything of rural Russia? Why had he tried at all to break his journey anywhere?

Mr. Hayward answered as unconcernedly as he could, with a very innocent air, that he was an English tourist who wanted to form an opinion for himself of the agricultural provinces. But that answer only provoked the *ispravnik's* suspicions still more.

'To write about it in the papers, I suppose?' he said, with a slight sneer, in his very bad French; for Mr. Hayward, of course, affected complete ignorance of his native Russian. 'Yes, that's the way with you English. You spy out everything. But we Russians don't want you to come peering about our country without good reason. You must justify your presence by business or affairs. Let me see your passport again, if you please, Monsieur Mortimer.'

Mr. Hayward handed it back to him.

'From Paris,' the *ispravnik* said slowly, conning it over to himself, with the true Jack-in-office air of great wisdom and cunning. 'And you stopped at Berlin on the way. Well, that's odd now, certainly. Why should an Englishman come from London to Moscow *vid* Paris and Dunaburg? This thing must be looked into, sir. You are detained for the present, while I communicate with Petersburg.'

It was with profound misgivings that Mr. Hayward retired that evening into his narrow bedroom at the Smolensk inn. He slept very badly. The room was

confined, stuffy, ill ventilated. He felt a choking in his throat. Towards morning he began to get distinctly ill. He tried to rise, but found he wasn't strong enough. Hastily he sent round for a local doctor. The doctor came, and examined him with some care. Very little doubt what was the matter, he said. It was a case of diphtheria.

Diphtheria! Mr. Hayward's heart sank within him at the sound. He must get up at all risks, doctor or inspector to the contrary notwithstanding, and pursue his journey straight ahead to Moscow. If he died here at Smolensk, why, Owen's life wouldn't be worth six months' purchase. That vindictive Stefanovic! Those incriminating papers! He was a British subject; he brandished his passport ostentatiously in the doctor's face. He *must* go on at once; it was important business.

But the doctor shook his head. At St. Petersburg or Moscow, perhaps, where people are more accustomed to the ways of those mad English, his protest might have been successful. At Smolensk, a mere straggling country town, with a big military garrison, it was worse than useless. The doctor gave orders to the host as he went downstairs:

'See at your peril you don't let that lunatic in Number Twelve escape. His disease is contagious; it might become epidemic.'

And the *ispravnik* had warned him the night before:

'If you allow the suspected person in this room to leave the town without a written order from the superintendent of police, you shall answer for it with your own back.'

And the host nodded wisely.

For three days, accordingly, Mr. Hayward lay there, between life and death, in an agony of suspense, remorse, and horror. If he died, all was up; if he lived, he might arrive too late at Moscow to avert the catastrophe. And when the diphtheria itself began to get better, the doctor reported he was suffering as well from low malarial fever. It was that hateful inn. Mr. Hayward fumed and fretted. Germs flew about visibly. Week passed after week, and still he lay there like a log. What might be happening

meanwhile at Moscow he hadn't the slightest idea. He daren't telegraph to London; he daren't write to Olga Mireff at Berlin for news. He lay there all alone, and untended, in that dirty little room, eating his heart out with delay, and retarding his own recovery meanwhile by his profound anxiety.

One thing, however, he had happily been able to do. The very first evening, after the *ispravnik* had gone, and while he feared detection, he had written a hasty line to Fomenko at Moscow, and posted it openly, though unobserved, in the letter-box of the hotel. It was in cipher, of course, but otherwise plain enough. It said these few words only:

'I am on my way to Moscow. Do nothing rash till I come. Believe no foolish ravings. I may be delayed, but wait for my arrival. Remember, I am your chief. Implicit obedience is more necessary than ever.

'Yours, for Russia,

'RURIC BRASSOFF.'

And at St. Petersburg, meanwhile, General Alexis Selistoff had received news, with great delight, of a suspicious person who had descended unexpectedly at the hotel at Smolensk. Brisk telegrams passed quickly to and fro between the bureau of the Third Section and the little provincial office. The stranger had come from England, it seemed, and had an English passport, but he was last from Paris direct, as shown by the recent *visa* of the Russian Embassy. Moreover, he had stopped on his way at Berlin, no doubt for communication with the refugees at Charlottenburg.

Alexis Selistoff twisted his grizzled gray moustache still more nervously than usual in his intense excitement. Could this be the man they were so eagerly in search of —the Four Hundred and Seventy-five who was to proceed, on the quest of Number Four, to Moscow? What more likely? What more natural? He would have gone in that case from England to Paris to see Valerian Stefanovic, as they knew Four Hundred and Seventy-five had done. Then on to Berlin, to visit that mysterious woman

whom Olga Mireff was always dogging, and who, no doubt, had forwarded the letters to Ossinsky at Kieff. Thence to Moscow by devious ways—such as Smolensk *vid* Dunaburg.

Alexis Selistoff stroked his chin with unconcealed delight. They were running the fox to earth at last, it was clear. He believed he had his hand on Ruric Brassoff.

But he was in no hurry to take him till he knew all was safe. He must prove it up to the hilt. He must be sure of his prisoner.

'And meanwhile, good Mr. Ispravnik at Smolensk, I beg of you, keep a sharp eye on this man. Don't let him escape, but above all, don't let him guess for a moment you're watching him.'

And then, one day later, good news from Moscow! Ha, ha! a great victory!

'The telegram in cipher which your Excellency desired should be intercepted *en route* has come to hand to-day. It is directed'—Alexis Selistoff's eyes gleamed bright at the sight—'to Michae' Fomenko, 24, Slav Bazar Street.'

The chief of the Third Section held it up for some minutes in triumph, and gazed at it before he proceeded to decipher it. This, then, was Number Four's address —24, Slav Bazar Street. His ruse had succeeded. He had found out the house where Four Hundred and Seventy-five, be he Ruric Brassoff or not, was so soon to present himself.

After a minute or two he began painfully to spell out the words and sentences of the ciphered message. They didn't tell him much, to be sure; but as far as they went they confirmed his suspicions.

'Michael Fomenko, 24, Slav Bazar Street. Number Three telegraphs to me from Eydtkuhnen that he is safe across the frontier, and that rumours of his arrest are entirely false. Police on the track. Beware of Four Hundred and Seventy-five. He came to me here and tried to extort from me my copy of sealed envelopes. I believe he has turned traitor. Perhaps Forty-three has turned traitor with him.

'NUMBER TWO, PARIS.'

Alexis Selistoff pressed his bell.

The chief clerk entered.

'Nikita,' the General said, holding the telegram in one hand, 'this is very important. Wire at once to the *ispravnik* at Smolensk that no difficulties must be thrown in the way of the Englishman Mortimer. As soon as he's well enough, he is to be permitted to go where he will, to Moscow or elsewhere. But on no account must he be lost sight of for one single second, or allowed to get across the frontier out of the country.'

The chief clerk bowed.

'It shall be attended to, Excellency,' he answered, all compliance.

'And look here,' Alexis Selistoff went on, thinking it out as he spoke; 'I shall want this fellow watched—watched closely, discreetly, by a competent person. I can't trust that meddling busybody of an inspector at Smolensk. He'll frighten our man, and give him warning beforehand. He's got no gumption. That's not what I want. We must give him, above all things, rope enough to hang himself with. . . . Nikita, you must go yourself. You're the man for the place. You've managed the business at Eydtkuhnen very well. You must manage this one, too. . . . Run down to Smolensk as a commercial traveller. I'll give you a note to the inspector completely superseding him. Let this fellow who calls himself Mortimer have his own way in everything and do just as he likes. Throw dust in his eyes, and no obstacles in his path. Make the inspector apologize to him for needlessly annoying a British subject. Wait a bit. Write a letter before you go reprimanding our *ispravnik*, and make the *ispravnik* show it to him. Too much zeal—you know the kind of thing—diplomatic, cautious—too much misplaced zeal in interfering with subjects of a friendly Power. But don't overdo it. Remember, if its Ruric Brassoff, Ruric Brassoff's a Russian, and he knows our ways. To put things too strong would only open his eyes and excite his suspicion. Let him go where he likes, but keep a close watch on him. Not obtrusive, don't you know. No soldiers dressed up in plain clothes and walking in pairs—one, two; one, two; one, two—

like a regiment. Few picked men, all unlike, all natural. Don't rouse his attention. But, one or other of you, keep firm watch on him till he gets to Moscow. I'll manage about Michael Fomenko myself. *His* house shall be watched, too. We're on the point of surprising them.'

CHAPTER XLVI.

CROSSING THE RUBICON.

WEEKS passed before Mr. Hayward was well enough to leave Smolensk. But before he left, it was some comfort to him to see that all suspicion as to his nationality had entirely disappeared, and that the police had ceased to trouble themselves about his movements in any way. Indeed, he had the satisfaction of knowing that the blustering inspector had to eat humble pie; for the fellow came to the hotel, while Mr. Hayward was still very ill, and made most profuse apologies for his unintentional rudeness to a British subject. Nay, he even showed, at the same time, by official command, a departmental letter he had received that day from his chief at St. Petersburg. Mr. Hayward smiled to read it—'twas so intensely Russian. He saw in a moment it was meant to be taken two ways. The supposed angry Englishman was expected to accept it as a complete snub for the inspector and a victory for himself, while the inspector's pride was gracefully salved at the same time by a careful reservation or two as to the abstract right of the police to interrogate foreigners whenever they thought it necessary. Nikita, indeed, had done his work well. He had succeeded in binding even Ruric Brassoff.

From that day forth, accordingly, the police gave him no more trouble. He was allowed to do as he liked, and what he specially noted was the gratifying fact that no spy or detective was set to watch him. Mr. Hayward knew well the Russian spy, his clumsiness and his awkwardness. He remembered him in the great upheaval of 1871 as though it had been but yesterday. It was

the easiest thing in the world, indeed, to recognise the *mouchard*. That embarrassed air, that ostentatious carelessness, that glance full of suspicion and fear which he fixes upon the countenance of every passer-by—these are signs which can never deceive an experienced eye like Ruric Brassoff's. And yet those men shrink from looking you full in the face, for all that; they skulk and glance sideways; they slink by and look askance to see if you notice them. So different from the frank gaze of the honest commercial traveller, for example, who came from Petersburg to Smolensk during Mr. Hayward's illness, and who talked bad French to him now and again when he was beginning to be convalescent, in the poky little billiard-room. A good-humoured, light-hearted fellow, that blunt commercial gentleman—he travelled in tea—but provincial, very. It was amusing to hear him discuss Mr. Hayward's dress and Mr. Hayward's English manners, before his very face, to the smiling and nodding hotel-keeper. Of course he had no idea the man in the tweed suit understood Russian, so he was frankness itself in his brusque comments on the stranger.

'That's the way with these English, you know,' he remarked to the landlord one evening, taking his cigarette from his mouth and laughing unobtrusively. 'They're the most conceited nation in Europe, to my mind—the most self-confident, the most pig-headed. At Orel, where I came from, we always call them pigs of English. This fellow, for instance, talks about Russia already, after six weeks in the country, spent mostly in bed, as if he knew all about it by a sort of intuition. He'll go home and write a book on us, I expect, before he's done: "Six Weeks in Russia, with a Plan for a Constitution"—that's the English way. Ah, we know a thing or two, I can tell you, down yonder at Orel!—I beg your pardon, monsieur, for addressing my compatriot for a moment in his own tongue. He understands but little French, as you are aware. We Easterns are still barbarians. I was remarking to him upon the singular insight you English possess in dealing with the affairs of foreign countries. Your knowledge of our character, for example, after so brief an acquaintance with our people, seems to me

nothing short of marvellous. But there! you English lead civilization, of course. The French and Germans don't understand that. We Russians, who watch the game from afar, we know it;' and he winked at the landlord obtrusively.

Mr. Hayward smiled a grim smile. An honest fellow, this traveller, though he thought himself so clever. But if Alexis Selistoff could have seen his chief clerk Nikita as he uttered those words, both in Russian and in French, with perfect solemnity, he would have clapped the man on the back with effusive delight, and have recommended him to the Czar forthwith for immediate promotion.

At last the time came when Mr. Hayward might move. He was still weak and ill, but the good-humoured commercial gentleman from Orel, who travelled in tea for a firm in Petersburg, kindly volunteered to see him off at the station. That was really very nice of him. Mr. Hayward didn't notice, however, that, after seeing him off, the good-humoured commercial gentleman, unencumbered by sample-boxes, went round to the other platform and entered a special carriage of the self-same train by the opposite side—a carriage already occupied by two distinguished gentlemen of military appearance. Nor did he observe, either, when they reached Moscow, that one of these gentlemen followed him close in a sleigh to the Hôtel du Bazar Slave, where he meant to put up, so as to be near Fomenko.

That night Ruric Brassoff slept soundly in a bed in the town he knew so well. It was strange to be there again. It made the Russian heart throb hard within his weather-beaten breast to feel himself once more in the great heart of Russia.

Next morning early he rose, and after his coffee and roll—how good they tasted!—sauntered out into the streets with a swinging gait, looking about him right and left, like the English tourist he personated. Yes, it was Moscow still—that old, familiar Moscow. The time was winter. The same nipping, dry air; the same slush in the streets; the same dirty-brown snow; the same fur-covered mob of passers-by as ever. In the bright Eastern sunlight the gaudy Oriental decorations of the

Kremlin glittered and shimmered as of old in barbaric splendour. The churches stared down upon him with myriad hues of green and gold as in his shadowy childhood. The icicles shone on the eaves as ever. Only he himself was changed. He saw it all now with Western, not with Russian, eyes; it was a measure to him of the distance he had traversed meanwhile. He used once to think Moscow so grand a city.

The streets, he soon noticed, as he strolled on his way, were chock-full of spies. In point of fact, Moscow was just then passing through one of her periodical Nihilistic scares. The Czar was expected before long, people said, and police activity was everywhere at its amplest. Mr. Hayward's heart beat high with long unwonted excitement. This was just like old times! Spies! spies! how familiar! And how comic they were, too, these temporary detectives; private soldiers dressed up as civilians by the batch, and patrolling the streets here and there in search of the contraband. But they took no notice of him. They mooned about in little parties, like men accustomed for many years to concerted movement, and incapable of forgetting the ingrained lessons of the drill-sergeant. Then their dress, too, how grotesque! In the hurry of the moment, it was impossible to obtain different clothes for each; so whole squads had the same hats, the same coats, the same trousers. The very variations only heightened the absurdity. Some carried light sticks to give them ease and swagger, while others wore great blue spectacles poised awkwardly on their noses to make them look as much as possible like university students. But it was all in vain: soldier and spy, soldier and spy, soldier and spy, was written in plain words across the face of every one of them.

However, they never glanced at Mr. Hayward at all. A mere English tourist. He observed that with pleasure. Not a soul turned to look at him. Only, a long way off, at the opposite side of the street, a very different person lounged slowly and unobtrusively along the pathway after him. This person didn't in the least resemble a spy, or a common soldier either. He was a gentleman in appearance, and might have been taken for a doctor.

or a lawyer, or a Government official. He never came unpleasantly near Mr. Hayward, or excited attention in any way. He merely lounged on, keeping his man always in sight, and occasionally looking in a nonchalant way into shops at the corner. He shadowed him imperceptibly.

At last Mr. Hayward returned, and in the most casual fashion made his way once more to the Slav Bazar Street. At Number 24 he stopped short and rang the bell. The *dvornik*, or porter, answered the summons at once.

'Is Michael Fomenko at home?' Mr. Hayward asked boldly—for the first time, in Russian.

And the porter made answer:

'He is at home. Third floor. Letter H on the corridor. Go on up and you'll find him.'

Mr. Hayward went up, and knocked at the door the man had indicated.

'Who's there?' a shrill voice asked from within.

And Mr. Hayward replied in a very low tone, almost whispering:

'Four Hundred and Seventy-five. Open to him.'

There was a second's hesitation, then a man's face peeped half uncertain through the chink of the door. It was a timid young face. Mr. Hayward was prepared for such indecision. Quick as lightning he took a card and a pencil from his pocket. Before the man's very eyes he wrote down in a well-known hand the magic name, 'Ruric Brassoff.' Fomenko stared at it for a second in blank amazement and doubt. Then, making his mind up suddenly, he opened the door wide.

'Come in,' he said, with a tinge of something like awe in his ringing voice. 'Four Hundred and Seventy-five, I welcome you.'

Mr. Hayward entered. The door shut quick behind his back. The fatal step was taken. He was in Russia once more, talking Russian as of old, and closeted close in Moscow with a suspected Nihilist.

But at the very same moment that he mounted the stairs of Number 24, the gentlemanly person who had been following him down the street passed carelessly

under the big gateway of a house opposite. As he passed it his manner altered; he grew grim and formal. On the first-floor, he entered a room on the right without knocking. In it sat the good-humoured commercial person from Orel, who travelled in tea, and who had come on from Smolensk. He was seated in the gloom, a little way back from the window; the blind was pulled rather more than half-way down; and in his hand he held an opera-glass. He was looking across towards the other house opposite.

The gentlemanly person nodded.

'Well, Nikita,' he said gaily, in a triumphant whisper, 'I think we've secured him. This is our man, I don't doubt. If he isn't Ruric Brassoff, at any rate, in spite of his English tweed suit, he talks Russian fluently. For he spoke to the porter a long sentence, and the porter answered him at once. Now, I happen to know our good friend Borodin, who's been *dvornik* over there by my orders for a fortnight, doesn't speak a single word of either French or German.'

Nikita smiled acquiescence.

'Yes, we've got him!' he said. 'We've got him!'

CHAPTER XLVII.

A SINGULAR INCIDENT.

Michael Fomenko's room was a bare little *salon* on the third-floor of an overgrown Moscow tenement-house, let out in flats and apartments after the Parisian fashion. The furniture was scanty and *bourgeois* in character—a round table in the middle, a square sofa, a few chairs, with the inevitable *samovar*, made up its chief contents. On one side stood a desk, with locked drawers and little pigeon-holes. On the other, a door led into a cupboard in the wall, or, rather, in the partition which separated the room from the adjoining *salon*.

This adjoining *salon*, as it happened, had been occupied for some days by the gentlemanly person who knew Nikita.

As Mr. Hayward entered, and cast a glance round the

apartment, he saw at once that Fomenko was greatly perturbed at his arrival. His new acquaintance—for they had known one another hitherto on paper only—was an earnest-looking young man of twenty-five or thereabouts, substituted by Mr. Hayward as one of Owen's 'trustees' after the death of Dimitri Ogareff in 1887. He was tall and fair, a journalist by trade, but a poet by temperament, very handsome and ardent, with intense blue eyes, and delicate quivering nostrils, like a wild horse of the Ukraine. There was a look of eagerness on his face, too, a divine unrest, which no terror could eclipse, no pallor blot out from it. But he was doubly alarmed, just then, all the same, at Mr. Hayward's presence. In the first place, he was afraid lest spies should discover him closeted with Ruric Brassoff. In the second place, he wasn't sure whether this was really Ruric Brassoff himself at all, or only some ingenious police pretender. Stefanovic's letters had given him grave cause to doubt. He faltered and hesitated, unwilling on the one hand to incriminate himself to a possible spy, or on the other hand to be guilty of discourtesy or suspicion towards the real Ruric Brassoff.

The Chief, however, well experienced in reading every sentiment of the revolutionary heart, divined his difficulty at once, and met it with perfect candour.

'You are afraid, Fomenko,' he said kindly, taking the young man's arm with that paternal air that seemed so natural to him after twenty years' intercourse with Owen Cazalet. 'You suspect me of being a spy. My dear friend, I don't wonder. It's not surprising you should think me so. We live in such a terror. But I'm Ruric Brassoff, all the same. You have seen my own hand for it. Ask me what other proof on earth you will. I will satisfy your curiosity.'

The young man, taking in the situation slowly, hung back once more, and regarded him with anxiety. What was this he had done? Already he had admitted more than enough to hang himself. Four Hundred and Seventy-five! Ruric Brassoff? The police were so ubiquitous! He had let the man in on the strength of such assurances. Suppose he was really a spy? He

gazed at Mr. Hayward with infinite fear and distrust hovering in those earnest blue eyes.

'There must be some mistake somewhere,' he said, faltering. 'I know nobody of the name of Ruric Brassoff. And Seven Hundred and Forty-five—what do you mean by that? This is Number 24. You must have mistaken your directions.'

A soft and quiet smile, half contempt, half pity, played almost unobserved round Mr. Hayward's arictocratic lips. This young man was a very poor conspirator indeed, when it came to dealing with spies—but he was good and honest.

'My dear fellow,' the Chief said frankly, seating himself in a chair, and drawing it up to the table, 'if I were really a detective, all this beating about the bush would avail you nothing. You're shutting the stable door, as the English proverb says, after the steed is stolen. You've said and done quite enough to condemn you already. No man who wasn't one of us would for a moment have admitted me on that name and number—above all, just now, in the present state of Moscow. Don't try to hedge in that futile way. If I'm a spy and I want to catch you, I've evidence enough and to spare already. If I'm Ruric Brassoff—as I am—don't let us waste any more of my precious time upon such dangerous nonsense. Let's get to business at once. I've come to relieve you of a great responsibility.'

'Hush, hush!' Fomenko cried, sitting down and leaning across towards him eagerly. 'You must be very careful. Mind what you say or do. We're surrounded just now by enemies on every side. I can see them everywhere. There's a lodger downstairs, for example—a woman with great staring eyes, a milliner or something—she's a spy, I'm certain. And there's a man next door, a sort of official or underling, who meets me on the stairs a great deal oftener than I think at all natural; I believe he's watching me. I'd have moved from these apartments long ago, in fact, and cleared them of documents, only I was afraid of exciting still greater suspicion if I went away elsewhere. And besides—I was waiting for—I was expecting visitors.'

'Myself, in fact,' Mr. Hayward suggested.

'Well, at any rate Ruric Brassoff.'

Mr. Hayward leaned quietly forward.

'Now, Fomenko, my dear friend,' he said, in a very grave voice, 'you've admitted the fact openly, yourself, and if I were a spy I should by this time have everything I could wish against you. But I'm not a spy. As I told you just now, I'm Ruric Brassoff. Why do you hesitate to believe it? That handwriting I've just showed you is the hand you have always so gladly obeyed. I know your devotion; no patriot more eager. If I had sent you an order through the regular channels, signed with that self-same name—I remember your fidelity well—you know yourself you would implicitly have obeyed it.'

The young man hesitated.

'Yes, certainly,' he said at last, 'if it came, as you say, through the regular channels.'

'But you doubt me, all the same?' And he looked at him reproachfully.

Fomenko smiled a faint smile. His moral courage was great, his physical courage feeble.

'Spies are so clever,' he murmured low, 'and forgery's so easy.'

'But what makes you doubt?' Mr. Hayward asked, laying his hand on the young man's arm.

'Well, I saw a portrait of Ruric Brassoff once,' Fomenko answered, blushing, 'and to tell you the truth, dear friend, even allowing for age and disguise and all that, you don't in the least resemble him.'

A wonderful light dawned in Mr. Hayward's eyes. With an outburst of emotion, he seized the young man by the wrist, and pulled him towards him unresisting. The manœuvre was well devised. The magnetic touch seemed to thrill through Fomenko's frame, as it had often thrilled through Owen Cazalet's. Then, in a low, quick voice, Mr. Hayward began to pour into his brother conspirator's ear the same astounding tale of a hard-won victory over nature and his own body which he had poured into Olga Mireff's in the sanctum at Bond Street. Fomenko listened, all responsive, with a sympathetic tremor that rang resonant through his inmost marrow.

The effect was marvellous. As Mr. Hayward went on, the young man flushed rosy red; all doubt and fear left him. When the Chief had finished his tale, Fomenko rose, all tremulous, and in a tumult of feeling wrung his hand twice or thrice. Then, yielding to an Oriental impulse, he fell on the elder's bosom and sobbed aloud for a minute with almost inaudible murmurs. He spoke very low and cautiously, but he spoke out of his full heart.

'Ruric Brassoff, Ruric Brassoff!' he cried, in a tone of profound shame, 'forgive me, forgive me! If for one second I seemed to doubt you, it was not *you*, but *them*, that I feared and doubted. I doubt no longer now. I fear no longer. I know you at once by your great words for Russia's truest son. I thank God I have lived to hear that noble voice. Command, and I will obey. I am yours, for Russia.'

A sympathetic moisture stood dim in Mr. Hayward's eyes. The revolutionist within him was now thoroughly awakened once more. Ashamed as he felt of himself and of the double part he was perforce playing, he was yet proud of disciples like Michael Fomenko. And, after all, he said to his own heart, it *was* for Russia—for Russia. For was it not better in the long-run for Russia that she should have Owen Cazalet's sympathy and aid from afar off in England, than that he should be cut off in all his youth and strength and beauty, who might do and dare so much in quieter and more peaceful ways to serve and befriend her?

He sat down at the table, took a pen in his hand, and wrote a few words on a scrap of paper, which he handed to Fomenko.

'There,' he said, 'if you want more proof, is the last order I sent you, from the inn at Smolensk.'

But Fomenko, hardly looking at it, made answer in a tone of the most fervid enthusiasm:

'I need no proof at all. I only ask your pardon. Now I have once heard Ruric Brassoff's own grand words, Ruric Brassoff's own authentic voice, I require nothing further. Your speech is enough. It is the tongue of a seer, a priest, a prophet.'

The Chief took his hand once more. He wrung it hard. He held it, trembling. Heart went out to heart. They two thrilled in harmony. For a moment neither broke that sacred silence. Then Ruric Brassoff spoke again :

'And you can trust me?' he asked gently.

'Implicitly.'

Again the great Nihilist pressed his follower's hand hard. Oh, how glad he was he had to deal with a poet's soul like this, instead of with a mere suspicious and pragmatical fool like Valerian Stefanovic!

'And you don't mind what that narrow brain has written you from Paris?' he asked again.

The young man smiled an almost contemptuous smile.

'Stefanovic!' he cried—'Stefanovic! And when *you* are in question! Oh, the pathos of it, the absurdity! Mind what that poor thing says—that poor, cramped, small nature!—beside Ruric Brassoff's words!' He took his Chief's palm like a woman's between his own two. 'I know what enthusiasm means,' he went on, leaning over it. 'For your sake—in your company—I could die, Ruric Brassoff!'

The Chief stepped back just one pace, and fixed his eyes hard on the young man's.

'Then, give me back the sealed envelope,' he said, in a tone of command like a military officer.

Without a moment's hesitation, Fomenko hastened over to the cabinet at the side, with the locked drawers and pigeon-holes, took a key from his pocket, and drew out a small bundle of carefully tied documents. From it, after a short search, he selected an envelope with a large red seal.

'Take your own, Ruric Brassoff!' he said in a very firm voice, handing the paper across to him. 'You know better than I what is best for Russia. I hold it in trust from you. Though I die for it, take it!'

'And die for it you will!' a loud voice interrupted. Someone seized hand and arm, and intercepted the envelope.

In an agony of surprise, Michael Fomenko stared

round. Ruric Brassoff, by his side, leaped back astonished. For a moment the young journalist was dazed. It was the voice of the gentlemanly man who had lodgings on the same floor; and beside him stood the good-humoured commercial person who travelled in tea, and whom Ruric Brassoff had seen at Smolensk.

In the background, half a dozen of the soldiers in plain clothes with blue spectacles or light canes came tumbling through the wall. But they were armed with short swords now, and held in their hand regulation revolvers.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW.

It was a minute or two before Mr. Hayward—or Ruric Brassoff, as you will—stunned and surprised by this sudden invasion, had a clear enough head to take in what had happened. Then, as he gazed about him slowly, with one soldier on each side, he felt his arms being helplessly pinioned behind him, he began to realize all was up, and to see how the intruders had entered so noiselessly.

The cupboard door on the opposite side from the cabinet now stood wide open. But the cupboard itself, as he could see to his surprise, had no back or partition; it opened direct into the adjoining room, and through the temporary doorway thus formed he could catch vistas of still more soldiers in civilian costume, waiting the word of command, and all armed with revolvers. In a moment he recognised how they had managed this capture. The soldiers must have sawn through the wooden back of two adjacent cupboards beforehand, and at the exact right moment noiselessly removed the whole intervening woodwork, shelves and contents and all, so as to give access direct to Fomenko's apartment. More too! The two principals must have listened through the keyhole of the outermost door to their entire conversation. One flash of intuition sufficed to show him that Alexis Selistoff's myrmidons now knew exactly who he was and

why he came there. Low as they two had spoken, he couldn't conceal from himself the fact that they must have heard him acknowledge he was Ruric Brassoff.

The good-humoured commercial traveller stepped forward with an air of authority as soon as the chief prisoner was safely pinioned, and laid his hand hard on his captive's shoulder.

'Prince Ruric Brassoff,' he said, in a formal voice, 'I arrest your Excellency on a charge of conspiracy against his Most Sacred and Most Orthodox Majesty, the Czar of All the Russias.'

'Traitor!' Ruric Brassoff answered, turning upon him with a face of the utmost contempt and loathing. 'Vile spy and reptile, I'm ashamed of having spoken to you.'

The commercial gentleman smiled blandly and good-humouredly.

'Your own fault,' he said, with a quiet air of official triumph. 'You let yourself in for it. You should choose your acquaintances better. My name is Nikita, chief clerk and secretary to General Alexis Selistoff.'

He turned to his second prisoner.

'Michael Fomenko, author and journalist,' he said, in the same formal voice, 'I arrest you as an accomplice of Prince Ruric Brassoff in his conspiracy against his Most Sacred and Most Orthodox Majesty.'

Fomenko, white as a sheet, stood still and answered nothing. His horror was all for the arrest and betrayal of Ruric Brassoff.

The soldiers gripped their arms. Two stood in front of each, two behind, two beside them. Nikita turned triumphant to the gentlemanly lodger next door.

'I think, Major and Count,' he said, smiling, 'we may really congratulate ourselves upon having effected this important and difficult arrest without trouble or bloodshed.'

The Count bowed and nodded. He was all polite acquiescence.

'And especially on having secured this incriminating document,' he said, turning it over.

Ruric Brassoff glanced round in a ferment of horror, for Owen's sake. The Count held the envelope in his

hand, with every appearance of care, and gazed at the seal abstractedly. What was he going to do with it? That was the question. Oh, if only they had arrived one moment later, the Chief thought with a thrill of remorse, he could have flung it in the fire that burned brightly in the grate! But they timed their arrival well. Too well, too cleverly. They must have been listening and waiting for the critical moment to arrive, with car at the crack of the door and eye at the keyhole. On the turning-point they entered. The envelope was in their hands. All, all was lost! Alexis Selistoff would now learn Owen Cazalet's secret.

'Yes, unopened,' Nikita echoed, closing his lips firm like a rat-trap. 'That's important, very. His Excellency's orders are that we're to keep it intact till he arrives in Moscow. He desires nobody to know its contents but himself. This is a State affair. I have his Excellency's own hand for it. Excuse me, Count, you must give me the letter.'

The military man handed it over with a salute. Nikita wrapped it carefully in the folds of his capacious pocket-book, and placed it with deference in his breast-pocket. The Count stepped aside, and gave the word to the soldiers:

'Forward!'

Prompt on the command they marched the prisoners down the stairs and to the door of the house, one after the other, in silence.

Below, two large sleighs were in waiting—not common droschkys, but handsome private conveyances of a family character. A soldier driver sat on the box of each. In the first—for due precedence must always be observed, even where criminals are concerned—the Count took his place, with Ruric Brassoff by his side; the second contained Nikita and Michael Fomenko. Two soldiers in plain clothes sat upright behind in either sleigh, with revolvers in their hands.

'Shoot if he tries to move,' the Count said calmly; and the soldiers saluted.

They drove rapidly along the streets, the bells tinkling merrily on the crisp air as they went. In Paris or

London, the cortège would have excited no little attention. But in Moscow, better drilled, people looked the other way; they knew it was a case of political prisoners, and even to display too ardent a curiosity might prove a bad thing for the sympathetic bystander.

The sleighs drew up at last before the Prefecture of Urban Police. The prisoners were tumbled out and hurried into a room where a Commissary sat awaiting them. In a fixed official voice, Nikita gave their names and the charges against them with no more emotion in his tones than if he were accusing two well-known offenders of petty larceny.

'Prince Ruric Brassoff, formerly Aulic Councillor and Chamberlain to her Imperial Majesty the Empress, charged with participating in a murderous plot against the life of the Most Sacred and Most Orthodox Czar; and Michael Fomenko, author and journalist, charged with being an accomplice to said Ruric Brassoff.'

The Commissary noted down the wording of the charges with official exactness. Even in Russia, red tape keeps up some show of legality.

'Remitted to the Central Prison till to-morrow morning,' the Commissary said dryly. Then in a different voice, turning to Nikita, he added, 'You expect General Selistoff by the night train, doubtless?'

'Yes, he arrives to-morrow morning,' Nikita answered with a pleasant nod. 'He will examine the prisoners in person. Their information may be important. Madame Mireff is here already. She will be confronted with the conspirators when the General arrives. We expect she can give evidence of some value against them.'

'For the rest,' the Count said, nonchalantly twirling his pointed moustache, 'what we overheard ourselves in Fomenko's room is quite enough to condemn them. This gentleman admitted he was Prince Brassoff. And M. Nikita has secured the important document which the General desired should be brought to him unopened.'

The Commissary nodded.

'To the Central Prison,' he said once more, after a few more formalities had been gone through in a perfunctory fashion.

The soldiers marched them out again, and put them back in the sleighs, and they drove away, still more rapidly, towards their place of detention.

That night Ruric Brassoff passed in a solitary cell, fitted up with some petty concessions to his princely rank, but otherwise bare and cold and wretched and uncomfortable. And all night long he thought of Owen Cazalet and Ionê Dracopoli—and of what could have brought Olga Mireff at this juncture to Moscow.

If only he could have seen her for one minute alone! If only he could have said to her, 'Nikita has an envelope. Kill him! Secure it! Destroy it!' But there he lay helpless, cooped up in that narrow prison cell; and when he saw Olga to-morrow morning, perhaps it would be too late; perhaps he would be unable to communicate with her at all. Perhaps he might find her a traitor to Russia.

His own life he gave up—he owed it to Russia. And for Russia he despaired. But one thing still troubled him. He wished he could only have saved Owen from the sword of Damocles that must hang for ever henceforth over his head and Ionê's.

Olga Mireff in Moscow! What could have brought her there? he wondered. A horrible doubt rose floating for a moment in his mind like a hateful picture. Had Olga turned against him? No, no; he flung the doubt from him like an evil dream. Yet stay! what was this? He was a traitor himself. Whom could Russia trust now, if Ruric Brassoff betrayed her?

And then, in a sudden flash of insight, Fomenko's casual words came back to him with a new and unsuspected meaning. That 'lodger downstairs, a woman with great staring eyes, a milliner or something,' whom he took to be a spy—who on earth could it be but Olga Mireff?

Was she there to betray them or to warn them? That was the great problem. Would she turn up to befriend him to-morrow morning at that supreme moment, or to confront and denounce him as a convicted conspirator?

He had played for a terrible stake, and lost. If Olga forsook him, all was finished indeed, and Owen would be at Alexis Selistoff's mercy.

CHAPTER XLIX.

AT THE THIRD SECTION.

EARLY next morning a gaoler unlocked the door brusquely.

'Prince Ruric Brassoff,' he said in a shrill voice of command, strangely mingled with conventional respect for his prisoner's high rank, 'get up and dress at once. General Alexis Selistoff requires your presence immediately at the Kremlin.'

Starting from his prison bed, Ruric Brassoff rose and dressed, in a maze of conflicting feelings. They brought him some breakfast. He sat down at the plain deal table and ate it mechanically. Then he went out to the prison gate, where a warder, without a word, put his hands in irons. Ruric Brassoff accepted that indignity in dignified silence. A sleigh was in waiting there—only one, this morning. Fomenko wasn't wanted. The minor prisoner's rest had not been disturbed so early.

It was a clear keen morning of the true Russian type. Fresh snow had fallen during the night and lay white in the streets, and the horses danced merrily over it with the light weight behind them. At the door of the branch office of the Third Section they halted.

'Descend, Prince,' Nikita said shortly. And Ruric Brassoff descended.

Two soldiers took his arms on either side, and marched him up the stairs, unresisting and acquiescent. Ruric Brassoff marched on, as in a horrible dream. At the door of an office on the first-floor they knocked twice. 'Come in,' said a sharp military voice from within. Across the gulf of twenty years Ruric Brassoff recognised it as clearly as if he had heard it yesterday. It was Alexis Selistoff's.

The soldiers turned the handle and marched in without a word. It was a comfortably furnished office, with a Turkey carpet on the floor and a bright fire in the grate. Alexis Selistoff, calm and stern, stood up with his back to the chimney-piece. The gray moustache twitched

slightly with nervousness as he looked his prisoner in the face—the fox he had hunted so long and tracked to earth at last—but no other sign of emotion was visible anywhere on those austere features. He looked the very picture of an official martinet, as he stood there, staring hard at Ruric Brassoff. But he bowed a polite bow, none the less, as he muttered calmly, 'Good-morning, Prince,' with soldier-like politeness.

And Ruric Brassoff answered in the self-same tone:

'Good-morning, Excellency.'

A lady was seated in a chair at the further end of the room. As Ruric Brassoff entered, she rose, and gazed at him full in the face. It was Olga Mireff. Once, and once only, her bosom heaved tumultuously. Neither said a word, but their eyes met: that was enough. In a moment, Ruric Brassoff knew his follower was true as steel. Her look was a look of the purest womanly devotion. But it smote him to the heart. For the eyes meant supreme faith. It repented him that he had mistrusted her—that great-hearted, single-minded, noble patriot Olga!

Alexis Selistoff was the first to break the long dramatic pause. He scanned his man close.

'You've disguised yourself wonderfully,' he said at last. 'They told me you were altered. But still, I should have known you. I should have known you anywhere. There's Brassoff in those eyes even now, and in the firm set of that head. All the rest has changed, Prince: all the rest has turned traitor.'

'To the tyrant, not to Russia,' Ruric Brassoff answered, undaunted.

Alexis Selistoff sniffed the air.

'Give me that envelope, Nikita,' he said, turning round; and Nikita gave it him.

The General, moving forward a step, laid it down on the desk that occupied the chief place in the room.

'Undo those irons!' he went on coldly, with military brevity. And the soldiers undid them. 'Leave us,' the General murmured, with an authoritative wave of the hand, as Ruric Brassoff shook himself free with a natural gesture of satisfaction at the removal of the handcuffs.

But Nikita, standing aghast, ventured one moment to remonstrate.

'His hands are free, Excellency,' he said deprecatingly. 'Would it not be well for one other man, at least, to remain in the room to guard him?'

Alexis Selistoff turned round with an angry shrug of impatience.

'Go when you're told, fellow!' he said haughtily, a fierce light in his eyes. 'Am I commander here or you? Soldiers are mounting guard, I suppose, at the door as usual? And a Selistoff is match enough at any time for any man.'

At sight of the frown, Nikita and the troopers made haste to save themselves. As the door closed, Alexis Selistoff fell back into the armchair by the desk. Olga Mireff sank into another chair a little on one side, toying nervously with a flower or something else in her bosom. Ruric Brassoff stood up, with his hands now free, facing his interrogator full front with a look of fixed pride and defiance, and separated from him by the breadth of the desk only.

General Selistoff stared at the Nihilist as one stares at some strange wild beast.

'I have a revolver in my pocket,' he said slowly. 'It's loaded and cocked. Stand there where you are, Prince. If you come a step nearer, I draw, and fire upon you.'

Madame Mireff looked mutely at her friend, and her eyes seemed to say, 'Wait your chance; caution—caution!'

The General, getting to business, glanced carelessly first at a bundle of documents found in Fomenko's rooms. They were of precisely the same character as those already seized at Ossinsky's in Kieff.

'I thought so,' he said quietly, with half a glance at the little gong that stood by his side, one touch on which would have summoned his armed guards. 'This envelope, which answers in every respect to the one we missed at Kieff, contains the assumed name and present address of my misguided brother's son, young Sergius Selistoff. We now know what became of the one in Ossinsky's possession. You revolutionists, unhappily, will stick at nothing.

When our men went to arrest him, Ossinsky seized the criminating document, chewed it up, and swallowed it.'

Ruric Brassoff smiled.

'Ossinsky was a brave man,' he said calmly, fronting his captor without a single trace of fear. 'In my failure it consoles me, at least, to know such brave men and women as these have been closely associated with me.'

Alexis Selistoff held the envelope gingerly in his bronzed hands.

'I should have hunted this young traitor down till I found him and punished him,' he said very resolutely, 'if I had been compelled to do it. It shames me to think that one of the Selistoff blood and lineage should be mixed up in such devilry. But I know it's useless now. I see and learn from the letters sent by Stefanovic at Paris to Ossinsky at Kieff that Sergius Selistoff the younger, unlike his father, has refused to do the traitor's dirty work. For that you have repudiated him. Then, you shall have your reward. I take him to the bosom of the family again. This envelope contains directions how and where I may find him. I will find him, and make him my heir, and bring him here to Russia to help me with his knowledge of your vile associates. He shall assist me in hunting them down. Your dupe shall turn against you, Ruric Brassoff, I tell you. I will train him to be my bloodhound.'

Ruric Brassoff looked him back in the face with unconquerable pride.

'You are wrong, Alexis Selistoff,' he said in a very soft voice. 'Your nephew Sergius would reject with shame and horror your proffered money and your hateful work. He has refused to help us, it is true; but he loves Russia well, for all that, and he loathes her tyrants. If you try to recall him, you will get scorn for scorn. And if you publish his name, a hundred of our comrades will be up in arms at the word; they will take his life at once for his treason to our compact.'

Alexis Selistoff smiled, and broke the envelope open. He held it before him at a military distance from his face, and read out its contents slowly:

'Owen Cazalet, The Red Cottage, Moor Hill, Surrey,

England.' Then he murmured to himself once or twice, 'Owen Cazalet! Owen Cazalet!'

After that, he rose from his desk and moved calmly across the room, with his soldier-like tread, to the large bureau opposite, filled with drawers and pigeon-holes. Into one drawer he thrust the letter, and re-locked it securely, holding the key in his hand—a little brass key very daintily finished. Next, he walked back again, undismayed, to the seat by the desk. He sat down in it coldly, and fixed his steely eye once more on his expected victim.

But, even while he crossed the room, Madame Mireff, on her part, had not been idle. Her chance had come; with woman's instinct she seized it. Noiseless, but quick as lightning, with a strange gleam in her eye, she rose up as the General rose, and took a step or two, unperceived, across the floor towards Ruric Brassoff. She drew her hand from her bosom and held it out in front of her. Something bright passed hastily with a meaning glance between them. Ruric Brassoff hid the toy for a minute in the side pocket of his coat. Then, noiseless again, and quick as lightning once more, while Alexis Selistoff was still unlocking and relocking the drawer, Olga Mireff slipped back, unperceived, to her seat. She sat down like a mouse. The whole little manœuvre, all unseen and unnoted, occupied but a second or two. For stealthiness and silence it was catlike in its dexterity. Ruric Brassoff felt proud of his disciple's cleverness. On that soft Turkey carpet her light footfall went unheeded. When Alexis Selistoff turned again, Madame was sitting there as motionless and as deeply interested as before, still toying with some imaginary object in her heaving bosom. Alexis Selistoff never suspected for a moment she had moved. But the pretty little revolver of the delicate workmanship lay snugly ensconced now in Ruric Brassoff's pocket.

CHAPTER L.

RURIC BRASSOFF'S MARTYRDOM.

ALEXIS SELISTOFF reseated himself and looked up at his prisoner once more.

'Prince Ruric Brassoff,' he said slowly, in a very official voice, 'late Aulic Councillor, and formerly Chamberlain to her Imperial Majesty the Empress, it will not be convenient, under all the circumstances, regard being had to the unhappy misapprehensions of public feeling in Europe, that you should undergo a regular open trial. We propose, therefore, to deal with you instead by administrative order. The Czar's prerogative as fountain of justice will not in this case be delegated to judges. It will be exerted directly. When a man of your rank offends against the law, his punishment should be exemplary. You belong to the highest Russian aristocracy, the ancestral guardians of the ancient monarchical principles of our country. Your very name marks you at once as one of those who descend in hereditary line from the time-honoured royal house of Ruric. You were educated among your peers in the College of the Pages; you were honoured by employment in the service of the Court; you were decorated with the orders of the Imperial household. Every mark of distinguished favour was showered upon your head by our august sovereign. Yet, out of pure perversity, you chose to become the leader of a vile conspiracy; you misled the people whom it was your hereditary privilege and duty to guide and direct aright. For such crimes I could wish I might have offered you a fitting requital; might have sent you to the mines for life, where you would expiate your wrong-doing by a long, a laborious, and a squalid punishment. But you are too dangerous a person for us to risk the bare chance of your untimely escape. Stark dead is safest. I hold in my hand here a special rescript of his Most Sacred and Most Orthodox Majesty, condemning you to private military execution in a closed fortress.'

Ruric Brassoff bowed his head slightly. His conscience was satisfied.

'That arbitrary sentence,' he answered, in a voice unbroken by emotion, 'absolves me at once from all moral obligations as regards the Czar himself or his appointed ministers. It is an autocratic act—the mere despotic will of one man as against another. It is not the finding of a free court of justice, before which I have been legally tried and condemned; it is not the unanimous voice of the representatives of my country. It is a private act—man against man, open enemy against open enemy.' He raised his voice solemnly. 'Alexis Selistoff, you have condemned me,' he said. 'Alexis Selistoff, in my turn, I condemn you.'

The words rang with a thrill through that high-roofed hall. Olga Mireff leaned forward with glowing eyes that seemed to burn like a tiger's as she watched and waited. Alexis Selistoff smiled coldly. Ruric Brassoff himself stood erect and inflexible, surveying his opponent from some paces off with indomitable pride and unconquered independence.

'You may kill me,' he continued, after a pause, in a rapt tone like a martyr's. 'The revolutionary cause, you must remember, does not depend upon individuals. A nation is at its back; it is the outcome and necessary result of an organic movement. Cut down one head of us, and twenty will spring in its place. Revolutionists are created, not by us, but by you; by your despotic action, by the general discontent it begets in the whole Russian people, by the natural, irresistible, and organic tendency of all Russia itself towards a new and more human social system. Of this younger Russia I am the embodiment and mouthpiece, as you of the elder. I speak in the name of the people, as you of the Czar. The majesty of the many is greater and more authoritative than the majesty of the one. If you pronounce sentence on me as the spokesman of the court, I pronounce sentence on you as the spokesman of the nation. . . . And that sentence is, Alexis Selistoff'—something flashed quick in his right hand—'that you be shot dead here and now.'

He levelled the little revolver point-blank at his heart. Flash, bang, and silence. A report, a short blaze. Alexis Selistoff fell back, with a tiny brass key still grasped in his fingers, on the chair he sat in.

To Olga Mireff, looking on, what happened next, in a few seconds, was as a terrible dream for its vividness, its rapidity, its inexplicable suddenness. Before she had time to realize that Alexis Selistoff was really shot, blood oozing and gurgling in little sobs and jets from a wound in his throat, Ruric Brassoff, that great, that glorious, that beautiful Ruric Brassoff, had snatched the little key from the dying man's hand, and in a rapid, tremulous voice had cried aloud to her, 'Quick, Olga! Quick, take it! Before they come and catch me—I daren't do it myself—there's no time—the drawer! the drawer! the third on the left. Get the paper out! Owen's name and address! Burn it! Burn it!'

He rushed to the further side of the room as he spoke, still grasping the revolver. Olga Mireff, all in a maze, but on fire with emotion, rushed hastily to the bureau, seized the letter, and burned it. Ruric Brassoff meanwhile stood with his back to the door, which he had hastily locked and bolted from within. He was only just in time. The guards, roused by the shot, were pushing hard by this time from the other side. As the paper burned away, and crumbled to ashes, Ruric Brassoff rushed back in a tremor to the fireplace again, and let them burst in the door.

'Olga,' he cried, wringing her hand, 'you've been faithful to the end! One more thing before you die. Write to Owen Cazalet, "All safe. Every trace destroyed." Then you can do as you like. If you choose, you can follow me.'

As well as Olga could guess, the soldiers by this time had forced the door open and were rushing into the room. For a second, the sight of General Selistoff, sitting there in his chair with one hand pressed to the wound, whence blood gurgled with hideous noises, struck them dumb with inaction. Then, even as they gazed, Ruric Brassoff raised the revolver once more, and pointed it with a firm hand against his own white temple.

Before the foremost soldier could rush forward and prevent him, he had pulled the trigger and let the chamber go off. There was a sob, a deep hush. He fell forward heavily. The bullet had done its work with instantaneous effect. Blood was spattered on the floor. Blood was spurting from his forehead. Some few drops fell on Olga Mireff's dress and handkerchief. She gazed at them reverently. They were the blood of a martyr.

But Ruric Brassoff lay there, not yet quite dead, very peaceful in soul, through a great haze of unconsciousness. For Owen was saved, the paper was burned, Russia was avenged, and the tyranny had come one step nearer its final destruction.

Olga Mireff flung herself down on the still breathing body. With a woman, to admire a man is also to love him. And Ruric Brassoff had seemed even greater to her in those last few minutes than ever before in his life. She seized the little revolver, before the soldiers' faces, and slipped it unobtrusively into her dress-pocket. As she lay there, sobbing and unnerved, by the martyr's side, her first impulse was to shoot herself on Ruric Brassoff's dead body. But a solemn sense of duty prevented her from yielding as yet to that womanly impulse. To obey is better than burnt-offering: and Ruric Brassoff had said with his dying breath, 'Write to Owen Cazalet.' She must live on, now, were it only to fulfil that sacred bequest. What it all meant, she knew not; but do it she must; she would live to write to Owen Cazalet.

She repeated Ruric Brassoff's words over to herself, time after time, to remember them. But, indeed, she had no need. Every feature of that scene, every tone of that voice, was burned in as by a searing iron into the very fabric of her brain—'All safe! all safe! every trace destroyed.' It rang in her ears like the tune of a chime of bells. She heard it echoing through her head. It was a part of her being.

The soldiers removed her, wondering, and sat her down in a chair. Then they lifted Ruric Brassoff's body with unreverent hands, and laid it on the table. Alexis Selistoff's they carried out, to do it military honour. But Olga sat there still, and no man molested her

And no man, as yet, made any inquiries for the revolver. After awhile, as in a dream, Olga Mireff rose, and walked staggering down the stairs. An officer raised his hat and spoke to her as she went out. She told him, in brief, how it had all happened, omitting only the detail of her handing the revolver to Ruric Brassoff. The officer listened in silence.

'Where is madame stopping?' he asked, drawing out a notebook and pencil.

And Olga Mireff answered in a hard voice, as of one whose life is wholly cut from under her:

'At 24, Slav Bazar Street. I was watching there and waiting—by General Selistoff's orders—for Ruric Brassoff.'

And she had missed him, after all, when he came! She never was able to warn him!

CHAPTER LI.

AND AFTER?

From the office, Madame Mireff stepped forth blindly into the streets of Moscow. The news of the murder had spread like wildfire. In that inflammable atmosphere, rumour flashes electric. Round the Kremlin all was confusion and strange military display. The square buzzed with Cossacks. But no man challenged her. The agent of the Czar, the unrecognised diplomatic representative of the Russian Court, the trusted friend and confidante of General Alexis Selistoff, she walked out unquestioned, erect, and trembling, through the midst of that indescribable hubbub and turmoil. Superior officers murmured to one another as she passed, 'Madame Mireff!' and raised their caps in homage. Soldiers slunk on one side and let the great lady go by with a respectful salute. She was still free, thank Heaven! She might execute her mission yet from dead Ruric Brassoff!

Dead Ruric Brassoff! Ruric Brassoff dead! She murmured it over to herself in a dreamy, dazed tone. It seemed impossible, incredible; though she carried in

her own bosom the pistol with which her martyr had taken his great life, she could hardly believe it herself even now. He seemed too grand for death. And Russia without him?

The deep fresh-fallen snow was getting trampled down by this time under the desecrating feet of men and horses. There was bustle in the streets. People came and went hurriedly. Madame Mireff called a sleigh, one of the quick little cabs that ply for hire on runners, and, scarcely knowing what she did, bade the man drive—faster, faster, to the Frenchified Hôtel de l'Impératrice, in the modern quarter, where her maid was stopping. Her own boxes were there, and her private belongings; for she had occupied the room in the Rue du Bazar Slav as a place to look out for Ruric Brassoff only. Of course, she couldn't return to that hateful house in such a crisis as this. The police were in possession of Fomenko's rooms, and would be busily engaged by now in ransacking everything.

Tinkle-tinkle went the bells in the keen crisp air, as the sleigh hurried along—faster, faster, faster—over the smooth virgin snow toward the modern quarter. But Madame Mireff's thoughts were very different from their tone. She was reflecting how she came to miss Ruric Brassoff.

It was a horrible mischance, yet unavoidable, wholly. For three weeks she had occupied a room on the ground-floor of the house where Fomenko lodged, nominally to act as a spy for the Government on Ruric Brassoff's arrival; really, to warn her Chief when he came against impending danger. Of Fomenko himself she knew nothing—not even his name. She had only been told by Alexis Selistoff to watch that house, as Ruric Brassoff was likely to come there on his arrival in Moscow; and in her anxiety to save the great leader's life, she didn't care to risk discovery of her complicity in the plot by making too minute inquiries about the possible subordinate he might be expected to visit. But on the very morning of Ruric Brassoff's arrest she had left her front room for a few minutes only when he presented himself at the door; and she knew nothing of his arrest till, half an

hour later, as she gazed out of the window, still on the look-out for her Chief, she saw the man himself hustled into a sleigh between two brutal soldiers, a prisoner for his life, with his arms tied behind him. Then she hurried away breathless to the Kremlin, all on fire, to await Alexis Selistoff's arrival from St. Petersburg, and to ask leave to be present at his interview with the arch-conspirator.

These things Olga Mireff turned over with bewilderment in her own whirling brain as the sleigh hurried her on over the yielding snow through the streets of Moscow.

At her hotel it drew up short. The *dvornik* came out and received her courteously. A very great lady, Olga Mireff, in Russia; a close friend of the Czar's and of Alexis Selistoff's. Had she heard the news of the General's death? Olga Mireff started. Why, it was there before her! Yes, yes—impatiently—she had heard it, of course; was there herself at the time; would be a witness at the inquiry; had seen and recognised Prince Ruric Brassoff. The *dvornik* bowed low, but turned pale at the same time.

'Is Prince Brassoff dead, too, then?' he asked, with a tremor in his voice.

In a second, with feminine instinct, Olga Mireff turned on him. She had caught at the profound undercurrent of hidden sympathy and interest in the man's words and tone.

'Why, are you of ours?' she asked low, in a ferment of surprise, giving a Nihilist password.

The man started and stared.

'And you?' he asked, half terrified.

Olga Mireff pointed with pride to the spots of red blood on her skirt and bodice.

'Ruric Brassoff's,' she said hurriedly. 'I gave him the pistol to shoot with. It's here, in my bosom. I was one with the martyr. See here, I can trust you. I need your aid. It was I who helped him to kill the creature Selistoff. He gave me a dying commission to carry out. When it's done, with that same pistol, I, too, shall free myself from this hateful despotism. Come to my room, *dvornik*, in ten minutes from now. I shall want you to

post a letter for me at once—what an honour for you, my friend!—a letter enjoined upon me by Ruric Brassoff.'

The *dvornik* bowed once more, this time with profound reverence. His lips were ashy.

'If you are a friend of Ruric Brassoff's,' he said, kissing the hem of her robe, as Russians kiss the holy relics of saints and martyrs, 'you can command my services I never knew till now you were one of the circle

Olga Mireff looked hard at him.

'This is a mask,' she said in a very low voice, touching her cheek as she spoke—'this that I wear before the outer world. The other that I showed you just now is my face. And my face is sacred. Ruric Brassoff has kissed it.'

She went up to her own room, and sat down hurriedly to write. It was in terrible suspense, for at any moment now the police might break in to interrogate her. But she must send the letter Ruric Brassoff had enjoined. Not direct, though, not direct; that would be far too dangerous. In a very few words she wrote to her cousin Tania at Charlottenburg, near Berlin, asking her as a last favour to herself and Ruric Brassoff to forward a letter, enclosed, to Owen Cazalet, The Red Cottage, Moor Hill, Surrey, England. Then the letter itself she wrote, too; it was short and to the point:

'Dear Owen,

'I write in haste and fear from Moscow. Mr. Hayward is dead; you will doubtless have guessed from the papers before this reaches you that he and Ruric Brassoff are one and the same person. No one else on earth now knows that truth. Let no one else know it. Our dear and honoured friend was arrested in Moscow last night, and brought this morning before your uncle, Alexis Selistoff. I was present at the interview in the rooms of the Third Section. I supplied him with the revolver to do the deed. You will know already he shot General Selistoff dead, and then, satisfied with that act of justice on a cruel criminal, blew his own brains out. His sacred blood was scattered upon my dress. I would have killed myself then and there with the self-same

pistol, but that he commissioned me to write these last few lines to you. His own words were these: "Tell Owen, all safe; every trace destroyed." His dying thoughts were for you. What it meant exactly it is not for me to inquire; Ruric Brassoff so willed it. But after he shot Alexis Selistoff, and before he put the pistol to his own martyred head, while the soldiers were forcing their way into the room in disorder, he caused me to burn a slip of paper with your English name and address, which Alexis Selistoff had recovered yesterday from a man named Fomenko, arrested at the same time with our revered Ruric Brassoff. No one else had seen it. I send this out now by a trusty messenger. When he returns, I shall follow our beloved leader. Life without him has no charm for me now. For I loved him, Owen —I loved him.

'Yours and Russia's,

'OLGA MIREFF.'

She had scarcely finished this hasty note, when the *dvornik* knocked at the door. His face was white, but his mien was resolute.

'Is the letter ready?' he asked, in a mysterious tone.

'Yes, ready, friend, quite ready,' Madame Mireff answered. 'Take it out and post it.'

And at the same time she offered him twenty roubles.

The *dvornik* shook his head with a pained expression.

'No, no, 'tis for Russia and the Cause,' he said quickly. 'I can accept nothing for that. . . . But there's one thing I should like, if I dared to ask it.'

'What is it?' Olga Mireff asked, wondering.

'A spot of Ruric Brassoff's sacred blood,' the man answered earnestly.

Tears stood in Olga Mireff's eyes. She seized a pair of scissors on the table close by. The handsome morning robe she wore was spattered all over with little crimson blood-spots. She cut one circular patch out from the bodice, just above her own heart, with a round spot in its midst, and handed it to the man. He kissed it reverently. Then he folded it in a purse, and placed it next his heart.

Olga gazed at him with a strange feeling of fraternal regard. In the near presence of death all men are brothers, and at moments of supreme passion it is woman's native instinct to let her womanly emotions have free play without restraint or regard of persons. He was a common, stalwart, bearded Russian peasant; she was a high-born lady, delicately bred, daintily nurtured. He was tanned by the sun and scarred by the frosts of winter; she was white as the newly-fallen snow on the fields by the Oka. But she gazed at him for a moment as he bent, all reverence, over that strange relic of the martyr they both loved and honoured. Then she leant forward, unabashed.

'Ruric Brassoff kissed these lips,' she said in a very clear voice. 'I pass you on the kiss, in token of brotherhood.'

The *dvornik* accepted it with a certain stately acquiescence.

'For Russia,' he said simply.

And Olga Mireff answered in the same tone:

'For Russia.'

Ten minutes later he came back, pleased, proud, and smiling. Olga sat in a chair, listlessly toying with the beautiful, deadly revolver.

'I have posted it,' the man said.

'Unobserved?'

'Yes, unobserved, dear sister.'

'That's well,' Olga Mireff answered, without a tremor in her voice. 'Now go, that I may kill myself in quiet as he did.'

The man nodded his assent, and glided noiselessly from the room. There was a short interval of silence as he descended the stairs. Then a shot above was heard clearly ringing through the *dvornik's* lodge.

This time the prudent porter took two men up with him to search the apartment. On the rug by the fireplace Olga Mireff lay dying, with her mouth full of blood. Ruric Brassoff's fresh bloodstains were pressed to her lips by her left hand; her right grasped a revolver, very small and finished. The large eyes still stood open. They gazed towards the table. By its edge

was a photograph of Ruric Brassoff, taken twenty years before. It was half obliterated in places by frequent kissing.

'You can keep it,' she said to the *dvornik*, through a ghastly gurgle of blood. 'And the revolver, too, that Ruric Brassoff shot himself with.'

CHAPTER LII.

AWAY OVER IN ENGLAND.

It was a clear March day in London—a rare day for the time of the year; bright, mild, and springlike. The breeze blew fresh; the sun shone merrily. Fleecy clouds floated high overhead against a deep-blue background. For though the calendar said March, the day seemed April. Ionê, like a gleam of English spring herself, had been shopping in Regent Street, and meant to call on her way home at Owen's new office in Mr. Hayward's building. So she tripped along the wrong side of the street, that brilliant busy afternoon, as blithe as though Czars and Nihilists were not. To Ionê, indeed, in her irrepressible youth and strength and health and beauty, on such a day as this, the mere physical joy of living overbore every other earthly consideration.

She was too buoyant to grieve over long. Neither poor Blackbird's sad death, which she felt deeply at the time, nor her own engagement delayed, nor the impending terror above Owen's head, could wholly cloud or darken that glad Greek nature—especially when all the world around was steeped in sunshine, and a brisk south-west wind was blowing free over the land, laden warm with soft moisture from the joyous Atlantic. It blew Ionê's chestnut hair mischievously about her translucent ears, and played strange tricks at times with the wayward skirt of her simple little walking-dress.

Ionê had been in pursuit of spring frocks, and was in very good spirits; for though it pleased her to live for pure

love of it in Sacha's servantless phalanstery, she was amply provided with this world's goods by her father's will, and to-day she had been spending her money freely, as a woman loves to spend it, on her personal adornment. The joy of living had been reinforced for the moment by the joy of purchasing. Her light step rebounded from the dead flags of Regent Street almost as elastically as from the springy turf of the chalk downs at Moor Hill. A painter who chanced to pass turned round as she went by to watch her go; with that eager young face, those laughing eyes, that graceful ease of motion, what a model, he thought, she would have made for the merriest of the Oreads! And, oh! indiscreet south-west wind, even as he looked and admired, what passing glimpses you revealed of twin[illegible] feet and ankles that the Oread herself might well have envied!

On a sudden, at the corner, as she danced along lightly, with her eye for the most part intent on the hats and bonnets, a poster caught her glance, laid flat on the ground with flaring big letters. 'Nihilist Outrage in Moscow,' it said, in all the startling emphasis of its very largest type. 'Murder of General Selistoff by Prince Ruric Brassoff. Suicide of the Prince. Death of Madame Mireff.'

The last name alone must certainly have riveted Ionê's attention, even without the others; but it was with a quick flush of excitement that she read the first words as well; for though she knew nothing positive as yet as to Mr. Hayward's past, she felt sure at that moment it must be he, and no other, who had committed this final act of deadly vengeance on the oppressors of his Fatherland. And she trembled with indignation, already, at the bare words, 'Nihilist Outrage.' How dare they—the cowards! He was Owen's friend, and hers. Dear, dear Mr. Hayward! Who should venture to confound such an act as his with mere vulgar and commonplace self-seeking murder?

She bought the paper hurriedly, giving the boy a shilling, and never waiting for her change in the excitement of the moment. Then, just round the corner, she tore it open with feverish fingers and read the Moscow

telegram. It was short but decisive. She knew what it meant instinctively.

'Early this morning, a Nihilist prisoner, arrested yesterday in the Rue du Bazar Slave, and confidently identified with Prince Ruric Brassoff, the famous revolutionary agitator and exile, was brought up for examination at the tribunal of political police before General Alexis Selistoff, Chief of the Third Section. What happened during the interview is not yet thoroughly understood, as only Madame Mireff, the Russian lady so well known in London society, was present in the room with the two principals. The police are also very reticent. It has transpired, however, that, after a short but stormy colloquy, the accused managed to possess himself of a loaded revolver, which he may perhaps have concealed about his own person, and fired on General Selistoff, whom he wounded fatally. The General fell dead in his chair at the first shot. The door was then forced by the sentries on guard, who were just in time to see Prince Ruric Brassoff hold the revolver to his own head and blow his brains out. An envelope, supposed to contain a critical statement as to the Nihilist conspiracy, which the police had secured, and to which both General Selistoff and his assailant attached the greatest importance, is reported missing. The murderer's body is said to be horribly disfigured. Great consternation prevails everywhere in Moscow, and the Grand-Duke Sergius, Governor of the city, has issued at once a written proclamation putting the town and *banlieue* in a state of siege till further notice.'

'*Later.*—Madame Olga Mireff, who alone was an eyewitness of the deadly fracas between General Alexis Selistoff and his murderer, Prince Brassoff, has committed suicide in her apartments at the Hôtel de l'Impératrice with the same pistol which was used in the affair of the Third Section. The whole incident is thus wrapped in the profoundest mystery. It is now generally surmised that Madame Mireff herself, though an intimate friend of the Imperial Family, may in secret have been affiliated to the Nihilist conspiracy, and it is even suggested that she supplied Brassoff with the fatal revolver

Otherwise her suicide remains wholly inexplicable Numerous arrests have been made in the quarter of the sectaries. Trade and communications are entirely paralyzed.'

With the paper grasped tight in her trembling fingers, Ionê rushed round, all on fire, to Owen's office. She had no doubt as to the truth in her own mind now. Mr. Hayward was dead; but he had died nobly fighting; and he had protected Owen to the last—for the envelope was missing. Murderer indeed! Murderer! The lie! The insult! Dare they speak so of the dead? Ionê's face burned red at it.

She reached the shop, quivering hot with shame and indignation. As she entered, she thrust the paper into Owen's hands. He read it, and sank into a chair, as pale as death.

'And I brought this on him!' he cried, wringing his hands in his agony. 'Ionê, Ionê, it was for me he did it!'

'No, no!' Ionê cried hotly. 'He brought it upon himself. You were only the occasion, not in any sense the cause. He did what was just. And his life hasn't gone for nothing, either. He has died a martyr. It was the end he would have wished. In Russia—at Moscow—by his father's home—waging open war against the tools of the tyranny!'

Two days later Madame Mireff's letter arrived. It bore the Berlin post-mark. Owen read it with Ionê in breathless silence. When he had finished, the strong man clasped his hands like a child, and cried aloud and bitterly over that simple narrative. He had lost a father. But for Ionê it was natural she should think most of Owen's safety. Her heart came up into her mouth with sudden joy at those words. 'No one else had seen it.' Then, Owen was free at last! No living soul on earth save themselves and Sacha now knew the secret of his true name and ancestry.

She said nothing at the time. She only held Owen's hand clasped tight in hers, and smoothed it tenderly. But that evening, as they sat alone in the drawing-room at the flat—Trevor and Sacha had left them together for

half an hour on purpose—she looked at Owen suddenly, and, obeying a natural impulse, fell on his neck at once with a great flood of joyous tears.

'My darling,' she said simply, 'I can't bear to say it while you're so sad and troubled. And I'd learnt to love him, too. He was so kind, so fatherly. But, Owen, I can't help it; it's such a relief to me to know you've nothing more to fear. I'm glad it's all over. The strain was so terrible.'

Owen pressed her to his heart, and smoothed her hair with his hand.

'For your sake, darling,' he said, 'I'm glad of it, too —I'm glad of it.'

Ionê laid her head, nestling, upon his shoulder, and sobbed.

'And now, darling,' she went on, in a very timid voice, 'there's no reason on earth——' She paused and trembled.

'No reason on earth why we two, who love one another so well, shouldn't henceforth be one. No, Ionê, no reason.' He kissed her forehead tenderly. 'As soon as you will, dearest.'

THE END.

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